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The Blessing of the Fleet: heritage and identity in three Gulf Coast communities

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THE BLESSING OF THE FLEET: HERITAGE AND IDENTITY IN THREE GULF COAST COMMUNITIES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

by
Audriana Hubbard
B.A., Florida State University, 2010
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I dedicate this thesis to a couple of kids I call my parents, Steve and Julie, who have always supported me despite never fully knowing what in the world I’m doing. To those brats I call siblings, Stephanie, Jessica, and Joseph, maybe one day you’ll read this and realize your big sister is pretty cool. And lastly, to my wonderful grandparents, Wayne, Edie, Larry and Vera, who’s endless pride in me pushed me to persevere for fear of ever disappointing you.
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ABSTRACT

Annual Blessing of the Fleet festivals are held throughout communities all along the Gulf Coast; each year boats parade down local waters to receive the blessing of the priest before the opening of the shrimp season. The shrimping industry has a long history in the area and has become intrinsically tied to local individual and community identities. This thesis investigates three festivals held in Chauvin and Morgan City, Louisiana, and Biloxi, Mississippi to understand how the festival is used by participants as a way of negotiating their shrimping identities in a changing socio-economic environment. The tourism and the oil industries have been encroaching on seafood communities and many individuals have switched into these often more lucrative occupations. As a result, the Blessing of the Fleet has become a tool for constructing, supporting, and representing a shrimping identity. By incorporating tourism and oil into the make-up of the festival the event becomes a reflection of the current socio-economic landscape. Simultaneously, by emphasizing a shrimping heritage in festival displays, participants are actively reinforcing their identities to themselves and the wider festival audience. The Blessing of the Fleet originated as a means of managing the dangers of the shrimping industry, now, as the danger shifts towards a loss of shrimping, the festival has become a means through which individuals are able to negotiate and maintain their shrimping identities.
It was a beautiful Sunday morning in mid-April as I drove towards St. Joseph’s Catholic Church in Chauvin, Louisiana to meet with Joe, a church volunteer and Chauvin native, and my advisor, Helen. Only the day before had Joe informed me that we were to be this year’s decoration judges so the last thing I wanted was to be late, yet I couldn’t help but be distracted by the flags and streamers waving from the shrimp boats docked along the bayou. Having been to the Fisherman’s Mass the previous afternoon, I decided to skip the Sunday Mass. As everyone headed over to their cousins’, neighbors’, and friends’ homes to put together the finishing touches on decorations and party preparations, Joe drove us to the home of the Fontenot’s, a fulltime shrimping family. Behind their house sat the Tammy Mae, the lead boat, a large double rig trawler covered with disco balls, bright flags, and a family friend dressed in his finest velvet purple 70s costume. Noon rolled around and people were beginning to fill the boat while others continued to socialize in the backyard. It wasn’t until Father Trahan, the parish priest, began speaking that things settled down. We all listened and watched as he prayed for a safe season and prosperous harvest and sprinkled holy water on the boat’s disco-themed façade and all along the waters of the bayou before him. As the final “amen” was pronounced people gathered the remaining necessities on shore and boarded the boat.

Before the boat even left the dock almost everyone on board had scooped a plate full of freshly boiled shrimp and crawfish from the huge buckets overflowing with seafood. By the time the boat set off, Laura and Mary, fellow party passengers, were already educating me on how to properly peel crawfish with special attention to best part: the head. Father Trahan and Deacon Pete stood at the bow alongside their assistants holding the holy water. Throughout the day I
moved through the age and gender divided spaces, venturing to the upper deck to find the teenagers lying out in their bikinis and swim trunks passing around jello shots. Briefly Helen and I were granted access to the all male air-conditioned pilothouse, and were greeted by six or seven men with a boisterous “Randy, you brought us women! Welcome girls!” Our stay in the pilothouse was short; the rest of my time was spent with the women and younger children who socialized on the main deck enjoying and intermittently dancing to the blaring playlist of 1970s classics and current pop music hits.

As the boat parade progressed down the bayou people waved and yelled at friends and family celebrating on the shore. Two men in the pilothouse saw a woman at a backyard party they had both dated (at separate times of course) and stepped out together hollering and embarrassing her. I heard others share a word or two about the “foreigners”, or visitors, viewing the spectacle from the local sculpture garden.\(^1\) As the boat moved slowly through the waters, Father Trahan sprinkled holy water upon the shrimp boats, pleasure boats, jet skis, “everything, even those that are sunk,” he later told me. As they received their blessings the boats drifted in behind the lead boat forming a procession of over twenty-five vessels parading down the bayou. It was a sight to behold as working ships moved along with their masts covered in vibrant flags and intricately themed, often handmade decorations. Boats proudly displayed their favorite football team (typically Louisiana State University or the New Orleans Saints), promoted breast cancer awareness with pink ribbons and signs saying “Bless Us With A Cure” and “Cure ‘Dat,” or incorporated the owner’s religiosity with crosses, Bible verses, rosaries and images of Jesus.

\(^1\) Artist Kenny Hill created the Chauvin Sculpture Garden during the 1990s. The garden is filled with over 100 concrete sculptures packed together on a small piece of property next to Bayou Petit Caillou (Godshall 2009). The site was gifted to Nicholls State University and in 2002 was opened to the public. Nicholls holds a biennial folk festival on the Sculpture Garden grounds for the Blessing of the Fleet.
The Amanda Grace’s Halloween theme included a homemade mural hanging between the rigs, orange and black streamers, and images of witches, mummies, and candies plastered to the sides. Even the riders wore Halloween clothes and costumes. One of the single rig ships used an Elvis theme; it was covered in paper albums and guitars and signs stating “Elvis Has Left The Bayou,” the requisite Elvis impersonator was onboard, and even the boatshed in the backyard was designated as “Graceland.”

I spent the afternoon confusedly and sometimes frantically judging the boat contest, watching in awe as 15 women of all ages took over the main deck to dance to the popular rap song “The Wobble,” and gorging myself on the delicious seafood boil. After a few hours of socializing, eating, and drinking on board the lead boat, we turned down the canal towards Lake Boudreaux and put out the anchor while the other ships followed suit. Soon a crowd of boats settled out on the water for the remaining afternoon. Parties continued on as the sun steadily dropped in the sky and we departed back to the church to deliberate over the contest. Winners were chosen for best decorations in double rig, single rig, and a special category for most religious, but the prizes themselves were of little significance compared to the tradition and prestige of a well-decorated boat. The winners were announced Monday morning once the decorations were taken down, stored away for another year, and boats were prepared, not for celebration, but for hard work and the first trip of the shrimp season.

Festivals like this one occur before the opening of the shrimp season all along the Gulf Coast, throughout Louisiana, across Mississippi and Alabama and into Florida. Formally called the Blessing of the Fleet, but more often referred to as the boat blessing, the origin stories of these celebrations vary from town to town with histories reaching at least as far back as the 1910s. As they have developed independently of each other over the course of the past century,
these festivals have taken different forms, expanding exponentially in some cities while rapidly declining in others. Today, the larger festivals span the course of three- or four-day weekends and incorporate carnival rides, craft shows, live bands, festival King and Queen contests and many more attractions. Other events proceed like the boat blessing in Chauvin previously described. With a less prominent tourism industry and limited advertisement (often church bulletins and regional newspapers) these smaller events require more local knowledge of the event than the larger ones. Where to go to view the parade and how to bring a boat to receive a blessing are simple examples of the kinds of basic information a visitor may lack. Community members are quick to offer a ride on their boat or an invitation to their party, as I was told, “If they like your looks when they see you they’ll say come and eat with us.” But this local access to smaller boat blessings is more difficult to come by for the visitor than a large open centralized festival conveniently located with the visitor in mind and signs, even billboards, advertising the event months in advance, as seen in the larger events in Morgan City, Louisiana and Biloxi, Mississippi.

This thesis considers three specific festivals and incorporates the experiences and histories of a few others to understand the significance of these local events within the changing socio-economic landscapes and how they relate to heritage, identity, and authenticity. For the most part all of these events share a common structure and key characteristics. They all include a Fisherman’s Mass the weekend of the event, fresh seafood (personally provided by party hosts or sold commercially by festival vendors), and the blessing and boat parade. Each boat blessing is presided over by a Catholic priest beginning with his initial prayer and subsequent sprinkling of holy water as the boats parade through the waters. Decorations are more pervasive in some than others, but they are found in all of the boat parades. Key differences include the scale of the
event and the incorporation of additional elements – many of which could appear in any small town fair or carnival.

My opening describes the 2012 boat blessing held in the small coastal Louisiana town of Chauvin. With a history as a church fundraiser in a predominantly shrimping community the event has seen significant changes since the local church bishop prohibited fundraisers throughout the diocese in 1995 and as the shrimping industry has steadily declined in the region. The Fisherman’s Mass, boat decorating, and food preparations are done on Saturday with the blessing and parade held on Sunday afternoon. Many older residents remember the days when the festival was two or three times as large, the decorations far more elaborate, and the parties much grander. Church documents state, “At the 1938 Little Caillou services there were 162 boats moored to the banks of the bayou, each newly painted and dressed with brightly colored flags” and “more than 1,000 fishermen and their families received Communion” at the ceremony that year (St. Joseph’s nd:60). Despite a decrease in numbers the event still has a substantial turn out with roughly 20 to 25 working trawl, or shrimp, boats and crowds ranging from small groups of elderly couples to parties of 30 or 40 people lining both sides of the bayou within the roughly five-mile parade route.

The Blessing of the Fleet takes a different form in Biloxi, Mississippi. Often touted as the Shrimp Capital of the World by many of its residents, the surrounding economic environment has seen significant changes in the past two decades. With the influx of casinos in the early 1990s, the landscape made a rapid shift from shrimp factories and working docks to towering resorts and charter boats. While the shrimping industry continues to be a source of revenue for members of the community, the tourism industry has become the dominant force in the area. For instance in 2009 the income from the combined annual landings of all seafood species in
Mississippi only equaled about two percent of the total tourism expenditures by visitors along the state’s Gulf Coast region (City of Biloxi 2011-2012). As these changes have progressed, so has the Blessing of the Fleet. A large festival held every year over the Memorial Day weekend in May, the event attracts locals and tourists alike. There is a daylong festival they have titled a Fais Do Do,² replete with a live music stage, craft and food vendors, and the Shrimp Queen and King coronation that Saturday. The following day the blessing and boat parade begin at noon in the Gulf waters. The festival has transitioned in recent decades to become a means of representation, a way in which the community can present their shrimping heritage both to their fellow community members and tourists. These changes have produced a festival focused on heritage, local history, and a romanticized past that attempts to maintain the sense of pride among event participants and local groups. Biloxi residents in attendance may no longer work a shrimp boat or own a shrimp processing factory but their pride in the occupation lives on through the festival and the histories it seeks to represent.

The third major event is the Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival held every Labor Day weekend in Morgan City, Louisiana. By far the largest boat blessing festival this event has reached enormous proportions. Spanning four full days, it has everything from crafts and foods to fair rides and a children’s center, music performances, a car show, pageantry, museum exhibits, and, of course, the Fisherman’s Mass and the Blessing of the Fleet. Festival officials informed me that they have an average total attendance of 80,000 to 125,000 festivalgoers any given year. It has become a huge source of revenue, not only for the festival itself but also for the

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² A fais do do is defined by folklorist Barry Ancelet as a dance and is often associated with a dancehall (Ancelet 1991:71) but the term encompasses an historical Cajun tradition of the dancing, courtship, and socializing at the dancehall on Friday and Saturday nights. These traditional events are no longer practiced as they were in the 19th century but the term is invoked in a number contemporary events connecting to Cajun heritage.
hundreds of vendors and surrounding local businesses. Distinct from the others in its explicit incorporation of the oil industry, the festival not only represents a declining shrimping industry but also a wealthy and expansive oil business. But the real differentiation between this festival and the others is not the celebration of the two industries but the festival’s continual growth and commercialization, and how this changes the scope of what is important to festival participants, organizers, and locals. The symbolic heritage of the shrimping and oil industries has become increasingly muted. Instead of celebrating heritage, history, or identity focused on occupation and industry, local pride is centered on the festival itself.

While these festivals stem from similar backgrounds and follow familiar structures they have developed within different socio-economic contexts directly affecting the events. The realities of a declining shrimping industry along the Gulf coast, the rise of tourism and oil and gas, and the growth or decline of participation in specific local events have created shifts in the festivals with regards to what planners and organizers choose to include, what is represented through festive displays, who the audience is, how church officials negotiate the religiosity of the event, and how local or longtime participants perceive these changes. As the festivals change so do the individual experiences of those in attendance. Longtime participants often express nostalgia for the finer decorations and better cooking of the past and voice reservations towards the larger events of today. Margaret is in her early 60s and remembers a boat blessing from her childhood,

When I was about nine we lived in Biloxi and I remember my cousin and I were hula girls. We had our little grass skirts on and we stood on the cabin of the boat and did the hula as the music was playing. It was really fun. But a few years ago I was in Biloxi at the time and it was different because they [the boats] were really way offshore and it was a really big event.
Younger generations fondly speak of the good times, the parties, and share personal stories such as that of Melissa and Bobby. The couple met during the boat parade and has been together almost ten years. As they retell the story,

Melissa: So we did end up on the boat blessing and we kind of knew it was a set up. We were supposed to talk to each other.

Bobby: So we talked for about ten minutes and went our separate ways. I think you came back or I came back and we spent the rest of the time together. They were laughing at us in the front because they could see us, the driver of the boat. She had me meet her folks that day. I went home to her house. I thought that was a little strange but it was sweet.

Now tourists, younger generations that have left home, and new community residents have a significant place in the world of the Blessing of the Fleet with new interpretations and experiences associated with the festival. For instance, out-of-town visitors may not have the same nostalgia for childhood experiences but every participant has a story and remembers the festival in their own way. How are these festivals important to the individuals that attend them? How do individuals and communities use these festivals to connect to their heritage and maintain their identities as shrimpers? This thesis addresses these questions through participation in the festivals and interviews with participants to understand the experiences and meanings associated with the Blessing of the Fleet.

RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

I began this research in the spring of 2012 and in this section I will detail the various approaches that shape this study. Selecting which festivals to attend and why they seemed important to study was a difficult task. With no prior knowledge and little literature on the events, I naïvely based my choices on two key aspects – the time of year and the size of the event. In basing my decision on the time of year I was able to attend more than one festival, but
more importantly, I had originally assumed that there may be significant local differences and perhaps varying shrimping practices that determined why a community held a festival prior to the May shrimp season versus the August season. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources determine the opening of the shrimp season each year for their respective states. Furthermore, Louisiana, for instance, is divided into three shrimping areas: inside waters, typically demarcated by the coastline, outsider territorial seas, and the federal Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). These areas have two inshore seasons divided into spring inshore from early May to July, often referred to as the brown shrimp season for the species of shrimp caught, and the fall inshore, or white shrimp, season from mid-August to December. There is one offshore territorial season from April or May to mid-December (LDWF 2013). While the timing of the festivals speaks to the issues each festival faces – namely declining or rising participation – the event calendar had much less significance than I initially assumed, with most festivals changing dates throughout their histories. Smaller events, such as those held in Chauvin or Golden Meadow, Louisiana, previously held their celebration in August but moved to May to increase boat participation, because larger boats did not have to come back in before the August season. As the larger festivals have grown in size they have strategically chosen holiday weekends, like Memorial Day weekend in Biloxi and Labor Day weekend in Morgan City, to accommodate their expansion. Despite all of the different date changes and attempted accommodations, since the opening of the shrimp season changes every year and is determined by state departments, all four boat blessings I attended in 2012 occurred just after the opening of the season. Overall, the second determining factor – size – proved to have a much more significant impact on the outcome of my research with respect to the many differences between the festivals.
In attending these festivals I attempted to participate in as many aspects as possible including the Fisherman’s Mass, riding along in the boat parade, wandering and conversing with the vendors, and viewing special performances and speeches. Brief informal interviews were conducted at the events in an effort to learn what festivalgoers thought of the event and how they were experiencing it in the moment. In addition to the numerous informal interviews, I conducted ten semi-structured interviews with parish priests, city workers, festival organizers and long-time participants providing a more comprehensive depiction of the history, development, intricacies, and financial components. In addition to specifically festival-oriented interviews, I conducted further work as a research assistant on a larger project on subsistence in coastal Louisiana with the Bureau of Ocean, Energy, Management, which provided me with insights into the shrimping occupation and the current landscape of the seafood industries in these areas. During this project I conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with shrimpers and coastal residents, which included discussions of the boat blessings – how the family celebrated, why they did or did not continue to participate, favorite memories, personal traditions – and frequently ended with storytelling and photo albums.

Archival research also contributed to my understanding of the history and subsequent changes in the festival and surrounding community. Glimpses into local libraries, church documents, and personal photography archives provided insights into origin stories and visualizing the ways the events changed throughout the century. I use the term archival loosely; I found very little documentation in university or museum archives. Instead, the archives I speak of include displays at the parish libraries in Chauvin, Houma, Golden Meadow, and Galliano,

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3 Hunted, Harvested and Home Grown: Food and Community in Coastal Louisiana supported by the U.S. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation, and Enforcement (BOEM, formerly Mineral Management Services, or MMS), Nicholls State University and Louisiana State University.
Louisiana, and church publications from St. Joseph’s Catholic Church in Chauvin and Our Lady of Prompt Succor in Golden Meadow. Personal photography is harder to define and ranged from individuals, such as Jim Peltier, who has acquired thousands of old images from community members, to visiting ice houses and shrimp docks where old photographs lined the office walls. These types of archives not only informed my construction of local histories and the festival, but also shed light on the importance, nostalgia, and attachment that community members have for the Blessing of the Fleet. Recent clippings from two local papers, *The Houma Courier* (Houma, LA) and *The Daily Review* (Morgan City, LA), shed light on issues that arose due to storms, hurricanes, or church politics. Two dissertations produced at Louisiana State University aided in providing analytical backdrops for the festivals. Conducted within the Department of Communication Studies, Barbara Gordon’s (1991) dissertation on the Chauvin festival added to my understanding of the history and a more systematic approach to who is participating in the festival, how festivalgoers understand the event, and how the boat blessing manifests itself in community rhetoric. Allen Alford (2003) produced his dissertation on the Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival in the Department of Theatre and focused on identity formation within the festival through an investigation of hegemonic forces based on race and economic success. Together these tools have all influenced my understanding and analysis of the Blessing of the Fleet and its similarities and differences among the Gulf Coast towns of Chauvin and Morgan City, Louisiana, and Biloxi, Mississippi.

In the following chapter, I review additional literature that helped to build my perspective on Louisiana’s culture (Ancelet et al. 1991, Bienvenu et al. 2005, Spitzer 1985, Ware 2004), the study of festivals and ritual (Guss 2000, Kruckemeyer 2002, Turner 1986) and the dynamics between folklore and anthropology (Sims and Stephens 2011, Toelken 1996). Chapter three
focuses on Biloxi and the impact of the tourism industry and combines Edward Bruner’s (1994) definition of authenticity with Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett’s (1997, 2006) analysis of the dynamics between tourism, representation, and heritage to understand how shrimping heritage is engaged and reflected to a tourist audience in a changing economic environment. Tourism plays a role in the Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival in Morgan City and chapter four investigates the commercialization of the event as it invites an increasingly outside crowd. Chapter five looks at museum literature (Bennett 2006, Bouttiaux 2012, Labi 2008 Witz 2006) to analyze the ways displays, such as pageants and exhibits, are used to represent, connect, and react to the changes within the shrimping industry and personal and community identities. Finally, I conclude with a personal profile exemplifying the multiple ways in which individuals are continually negotiating their identities by connecting to their heritage through new organizations and the festival context.
CHAPTER TWO: THE DISCURSIVE FESTIVAL

LOUISIANA AS A FIELD SITE

From folklore and journalism to anthropology and history, numerous fields of study and many scholars have devoted substantial amounts of work to studying Louisiana’s diverse cultures. Many have focused predominantly on the lush exoticism of New Orleans; Lafcadio Hearn’s 19th century journalistic writings could fill volumes on the “romantic charm of the old city” and its “curious cosmopolitan characteristics” (Hearn 2001:47). Zora Neale Hurston’s devotion to experiencing and studying the exotic and mystical practices of voodoo in New Orleans in the 1930s is artfully portrayed in her most notable scholarly production, *Mules and Men* (1990).

Research on Cajun groups blossomed after the Cajun Revival movement of the 1970s and 1980s with copious works dedicated to traditions and festivities. Foodways are a prominent ethnic symbol and popular discussion topic, including *Stir the Pot* (Bienvenu et al. 2005) and *Cajun Foodways* (Gutierrez 1992). Cajun music is incorporated in many conversations with zydeco, creole, and other Louisianan musical styles. Pre-Lenten festivals, such as *Courir de Mardi Gras*, have been researched at length, especially in light of innovations such as the use of trucks instead of traditional horses and the participation of women in recent Mardi Gras runs (Ware 2004). Various anthologies have been written in an attempt to document the multiple facets of Cajun and Creole culture, such as *Cajun Country* (Ancelet et al. 1991) and *Louisiana Folklife: A Guide to the State* (Spitzer 1985), with the latter also incorporating the cultural

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4 Mississippi is also included within this scope of research, especially as it relates to music, occupation, and Mardi Gras origins. For the purposes of this section I have excluded any significant works on Mississippi in order to briefly focus on Cajun identity and quickly move into a broader shrimping identity found in both the Mississippi and Louisiana Gulf Coasts.
practices of Vietnamese, Isleños, and Native Americans throughout Louisiana. More recent literature focuses on a topic of growing awareness and concern: drastic environmental changes along the coast. Scientific studies are abundant in geological, biological, chemical, and geographical studies of the ecological and environmental issues facing the state. Others have taken activist approaches such as Mike Tidwell, an author and environmental activist. Tidwell’s popular book, *Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana’s Cajun Coast* (2004), attempts to evoke reader sympathies while spreading the word about the damages impacting Louisiana’s distinct coastline and its rapid disappearance.

For the scope of this project it is important to understand the identities and ethnicities associated with the Blessing of the Fleet and where this research fits within the preexisting scholarship. Many of the individuals I worked with self identify as Cajun, predominantly through family lineages and cultural practices such as foodways and language styles. By no means are these regions ethnically homogenous: Vietnamese communities have developed in many areas, there are small enclaves of Latinos and African Americans throughout, and many white non-Cajuns, such as Germans or Italians, are found in the region. In recent decades the participation of other groups in these festivals has grown, for instance, according to Father Mark, the past five years in Biloxi have seen a slow rise in Vietnamese participation with a Vietnamese contestant for the 2012 Shrimp Queen and up to four Vietnamese-owned boats in the parade that year. Father Mark attributes the low Vietnamese involvement to the frictions within the seafood industries in the 1970s and places some of the blame on the church itself for not inculcating the ties between the groups in the following decades. While he is actively working to bridge the gap between his church and the Vietnamese Catholic church, by passing out festival flyers in Vietnamese and English for instance, the process has been slow, and despite growing
involvement from non-Cajun groups these festivals still incorporates a Cajun identity above all other ethnic identities.

While the popular image of Louisiana Cajuns found in movies or tourism ads is associated with the bayous and wetlands, oftentimes this image references the practices and traditions of prairie Cajuns found further west and away from the coast in the Acadiana region. The most widely studied cultural practices are those of the prairie Cajuns and research focused specifically on coastal Cajuns is sparse, in part because the academic base for the Cajun Revival stemmed from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette, located within the prairies of Acadiana. This thesis adds to the small yet growing number of coastal research efforts and therefore the distinction between Acadiana and Coastal Louisiana requires attention. While the literature may not deal directly with the subject, many self-identifying Cajuns speak of the differences between the coast and the prairie. Two key differences that come up relate to language and occupation. Often many French speakers cite the differences in the dialect of Cajun French as a distinguishing factor. Many of those I spoke with still actively speak Cajun French in their homes and with their friends. Academic research has been done in an attempt to distinguish whether dialects are truly distinct from bayou to bayou or between bayou and prairie. For instance, one such work is that of linguistic anthropologist Nathalie Dajko (2009), in which she analyzes language variation as it relates to ethnicity and geography between Cajun and American Indians of South Louisiana, specifically Lafourche Parish. Her results found that there were general patterns distinguishing Indians from Cajuns as well as linguistic patterns that linked Indian communities together. Despite the results of linguistic research, practicing speakers, more often than not, have claimed that there are very clear regional variations. Another key distinction is that the formation of a coastal Cajun ethnicity is intrinsically tied to a history and connection
to the seafood industry. Whereas employment in the prairies is historically related to agriculture and the onshore oil industry, occupations along the coast revolve around the Gulf, including both the seafood and offshore oil industries. As studies, such as Timothy Lloyd and Patrick Mullen’s (1990) research on identity among Lake Erie fishermen, show occupational identities among fishermen are particularly strong. Therefore, while many festival participants identify as Cajun, what is even more dominant is an identity, across and between ethnicities, connected to shrimping or fishing.

FESTIVALS AS RITUAL

Festivals have long been the study of folklorists and anthropologists alike; Louisiana, specifically, has received a strong interest from folklorists. The boundaries between folklore and socio-cultural anthropology can be blurry. The field of folklore has long struggled with the negative connotations of the term “folk” as quaint, simple, or antiquated. Following a similar pattern found in anthropological history plagued with the study of “primitives” and the explicit hierarchies of cultural evolution, folklore has been misunderstood as dealing with rural or native peoples. As Barre Toelken states, modern scholars now must attempt “to reform the widespread journalistic use of the words _folklore_ and _myth_…[where] the misunderstanding and misapplication of these terms seem to stem from a modern continuation of that notion… that only backward or illiterate people have folklore; where it exists among us, by implication, it represents backward or naïve thinking” (1996:3). Slowly these misguided understandings are disappearing and the definition of folklore is expanding outside of tales and ballads to include occupational practices, religious traditions, crafts, and festivals, often incorporated into definitions of folklife. I use Martha Sims and Martine Stephens basic and simple definition of
folklore as “lived, experienced, created, and shared by people” (2011: 31). Here the blurred lines between folklore and culture become evident – the difficulties of distinguishing one from the other become increasingly complicated. This thesis straddles the lines between folklore and socio-cultural anthropology. The Blessing of the Fleet is a shared experience created and lived by the participants. The festivals are dynamic and fluid and rely on the creativity, experiences, histories, and traditions of the community.

Ritual, as Victor Turner defines it, “is multidimensional; any given performance is shaped by experiences poured into it as much as by its conventional framing structures. Experiences make the structures ‘glow,’ structures focus and channel the experiences” (1986:56). As previously discussed, the Blessing of the Fleet festivals follow similar patterns – parades, Fisherman’s Mass, boat decorations, and a large supply of seafood, purchased or shared among family and friends. But the events also draw from similar social constructs – religion, occupation, history, and a sense of place. The Blessing of the Fleet is a festival that intersects Catholic traditions, the shrimping industry, the Gulf Coast region, and a history grounded in occupation and place. It also intersects with new populations, oil and gas industries, globalization and tourism. While these structures exist and contribute to the festival, the experiences of the individual and the community significantly influence the meanings associated with the festival.

Turner argues that the relationship between the mundane and the genre of cultural performance is not unidirectional and “positive” – in the sense that the performative genre merely “reflects” or “expresses” the social system or the cultural configuration, or at any rate their key relationships – but that it is reciprocal and reflexive – in the sense that the performance is often a critique, direct or veiled, of the social life it grows out of, an evaluation (with lively possibilities of rejection) of the way society handles history. [1986: 21-22]

The Blessing of the Fleet is not simply a reflection of the shrimping industry or Catholic values but an appraisal of daily life and the issues that individuals, families, and communities face.
David Guss pulls from Turner and others to outline cultural performance into four components. Cultural performances are:

(1) clearly framed events set off from what might be considered normative, everyday reality… (2) important dramatizations that enable participants to understand, criticize, and even change the worlds in which they live… (3) a profoundly discursive form of behavior. Actors use these events to argue and debate, to challenge and negotiate… (4) [able to] produce new meanings and relations… actively engaged in cultural production. [2000:8-11]

The Blessing of the Fleet is a bounded event, removed from the mundane, and it allows its participants to engage and react to the realities they face every day. New meanings associated with the shrimping industry are developed as many participants focus not on their current occupation but on their heritage within the seafood industries and the values they find important to carry on and reinforce within their identity. Guss goes on to emphasize the multiplicity of festivals, “the same form… may be used to articulate a number of different ideas and over time can easily oscillate between religious devotion, ethnic solidarity, political resistance, national identity, and even commercial spectacle” (2000:9). Often the Blessing of the Fleet engages in a dialogue concerned with the changing socio-economic environment. As shrimping and other seafood industries decrease in prosperity, individuals, families, and communities where shrimping has long been an important aspect of identity are forced to negotiate these changes. The Blessing of the Fleet becomes an event in which individuals and groups are able to reify their identity through an increased focus on heritage. For some still active in the shrimping industry, showing up to the boat parade makes a statement on the persistence of the industry; it says that, despite what it may seem, shrimping is still a viable and successful occupation. For others who have left the shrimping industry for the oil field or big city, the Blessing of the Fleet is a tool to connect with their heritage and the part of their identity that involves shrimping.
Kate Kruckemeyer (2002) examines the Goshen Woodchopping Show in Connecticut as a competition-based festival focused on the long history of the logging industry in the region. While the logging industry has diminished in that area much more than the shrimping industry has along the Gulf coast, she makes an important point when she states, “the group or community identity enacted in the Goshen woodcutters’ is of a different order, defined not so much by shared work in the woods, since only a small percentage of the participants are working loggers, but through shared public performance of values and skills” (2002:302). Similarly, an identity based on the shrimping industry and the heritage attached to it is being enacted through the Blessing of the Fleet while the occupation itself is facing difficult economic times. These events are a celebration of many individuals and families that have been a part of the shrimping industry and the values attached to that particular lifestyle.

When I first began talking to people involved in the boat blessing, I would always start with the standard generic question, “What is the Blessing of the Fleet?” Very early on I was struck by the standardized response I received so frequently: “To pray for a safe and prosperous season.” Technology has made huge strides in the second half of the 20th century creating a safer trip for shrimpers. As Father Trahan explained to me,

It’s been a custom for a while and it prays for the blessing of the fleet, a good successful season and a safe season. The trouble that’s happening now is that it’s been very difficult for the fishermen to make a living now in shrimping. They’ve put in so many laws that affect them, the turtle excluding device and they lose half of their catch with that. Then ice is expensive now, much more. The fuel is out the world, you know the gas prices right now. And it’s not every time they go out that they make a good catch, but you still use that same amount of fuel. And then the imports of foreign shrimp that come in, they’re not as good as the shrimp here but they’re cheaper. The fishermen couldn’t get the price for the shrimp that made it profitable for them to do all of that.

While advances in technology, such as GPS devices and better accuracy in weather forecasting have reduced the dangers of the Gulf waters or the hazards of the inland seafloor that shrimpers
face on a daily basis, the blessing has become a prayer for prosperity and a safeguard against the loss of identity and livelihood. The festival becomes an avenue in which shrimping communities can extend their identities as shrimpers outside of the occupation and into the festival world.

Parading down the bayou feasting on freshly caught shrimp in a working shrimp boat covered in decorations displaying Cajun French words and handmade shrimp cut-outs while blaring Cajun music through the sound system speaks explicitly to the identities and images the boat owners seek to display and preserve. Many shrimpers spend over $1500 on gas, food, and decorations every year, such as one shrimper I met, showing how the annual tradition continues as a testament to their identity whether it be as coastal resident, as Cajuns, as shrimpers, or as Catholics.

The realities of the Blessing of the Fleet are that many small local events have disappeared or shrunk significantly in recent decades, while others have steadily grown under the influence of tourism and commercial avenues. The shrimping industry across the Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf Coast is in decline and many ex-shrimpers are finding work running fishing and hunting camps, guiding tours, or, most often, in the oil fields. Storms, environmental damages, and poor economic conditions have pushed families further north away from hometowns. One City of Biloxi employee explained that after Katrina many residents moved outwards from the coast to areas such as D’Iberville, just north of Biloxi. The constant pressure associated with these issues raises the question, why is the Blessing of the Fleet still important? What does it mean to those who still participate? Why did one fulltime shrimper tell me, “I’ll do it every year until I die,” while an ex-shrimper and local restaurant owner said he’s just tired of it? The effects of the changing socio-economic landscape, rising environmental issues, and growing variations in local demographics are reflected, evaluated, and contested within the festival. The dynamic
and fluid nature of the event allows for participants to creatively adapt the boat blessings to engage the issues of their daily lives and connect to their local and personal heritage.

I use the word heritage often in reference to the Blessing of the Fleet and the connections that individuals have to their pasts. It wasn’t until I sat down and began reading over transcripts and field notes that I realized hardly anyone I spoke with used the term to describe the event or their experiences and identities. From the beginning of my research I have imposed an academic definition to a concept I perceived, using a word that rarely arose in actual conversation with anyone during my fieldwork. The term heritage is used and defined for by many for a variety of purposes. For instance, UNESCO explicitly defines intangible cultural heritage as

the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity. [2003 Article 2]

I draw from Kirschenblatt-Gimblett’s expanded definition of heritage that builds upon UNESCO’s and places the emphasis on the subjectivity of the individuals involved, describing them as “not only cultural carriers and transmitters but also agents in the heritage enterprise itself. What heritage protocols do not generally account for is a conscious, reflexive subject” (2006:179). Furthermore, she describes heritage as new relationship between cultural assets and what was once habitus, stating that “heritage is a mode of cultural production that gives the endangered or outmoded a second life as an exhibition of itself” (2006:168). This notion is particularly salient within the economic atmosphere along the Gulf coast; as the seafood industries become less viable for the larger population the Blessing of the Fleet can reinforce shrimping identities through increased emphasis on heritage.
Yet these are the definitions that scholars, myself included, are imposing on ideas expressed by community members. The term heritage is not absent from local vocabularies evidenced by the names of festivals and events, such as the Culture and Heritage Expo in Morgan City or the annual Chauvin Culture and Heritage Festival, but rarely do individuals within the community use the term. Instead phrases such as “our culture” or “our past” are used to describe what is important about the festival. It is the combination of these two concepts that directs me to the concept of heritage. When individuals say “our culture” they are referring to an important part of themselves and the community and when “our culture” is used in congruence with “our past” they aren’t talking about a distant history but an immediate past, one of their grandparents, parents, or even their own childhood. Through the Blessing of the Fleet individuals are able to connect to their culture and past in meaningful ways within the changing socio-economic climate.
CHAPTER THREE: THE RISE OF TOURISM

Biloxi, Mississippi is partially situated on a peninsula positioned between the Gulf of Mexico and Back Bay of Biloxi, in Harrison County. With the help of the barrier island Deer Island, the Gulf waters along the shore are calm and serene, perfect for inviting guests to relax and enjoy a swim. While the city lines extend further into the mainland, the popular region for visitors is that closest to the waters. The main road, Beach Boulevard, delineates the finger of land that stretches between the Gulf and the Bay. Driving down the four-lane highway visitors are bombarded with white sand beaches, towering casinos and resorts, souvenir shops, and seafood restaurants. The docks are filled with tour boats, charter boats, and personal leisure vessels. Billboards and flashing neon signs advertise upcoming concerts, shows, and special events all down the strip. Residential life, neighborhoods, and schools are tucked away a few roads back, hidden from the tourists’ view, except for those of us prone to wrong turns and misinterpreted directions.

The landscape has not always been as such; at the turn of the 20th century Biloxi proudly bore the title of the Seafood Capital of the World. Local memories describe the coast as being lined with seafood factories and the docks overflowing with working boats. It wasn’t until 1992 that casino gambling was legalized in Mississippi and the first casino, The Isle, opened its doors that same year alongside Beach Boulevard. As with many seafood communities, the seafood industry has seen significant decreases in recent decades with machines replacing seafood factory workers, increased regulations, and growing numbers of imports. For instance, Mike Guthrie of Guthrie’s Seafood, shrimp provider for the Biloxi Blessing of the Fleet, told me that his plant runs predominantly on machines and he’s capable of processing up to 12,000 pounds of
shrimp in an hour. Although Mississippi may no longer be the Shrimp Capital of the World, Mike claims that due to technological advances they produce more shrimp than ever before. Many residents are quick to point out that the seafood industries may not be as prominent as they once were but they nevertheless have a strong presence in the region.

According to the City of Biloxi, since 2004 the highest income of annual landings of all seafood species in the state was roughly $43.7 million in 2008, with about $9.2 million coming from brown shrimp landings that year. Comparatively, Harrison County, host to nine casinos, eight of which are located in Biloxi, brought in $1.3 billion through tourism expenditures by visitors in both the 2009 and 2010 fiscal years. Together, the three counties of the Mississippi Gulf Coast constitute one-third of the entire state’s tourism revenue, which brings in nearly 30 times as much as the seafood industry (City of Biloxi 2011-2012). It is almost impossible to not see the distinct impacts of the past twenty years of tourism development and how it has affected both the economic and physical landscape of the region.

Despite the distinct changes in the economic environment, many residents in the area have taken them in stride, choosing to incorporate new economic options and modify preexisting traditions. One of the first things a visitor stopping at a local convenience store asking for directions will notice is the ease with which locals integrate new landmarks into their directives. I was instructed to meet at the docks behind The Isle to board the lead boat, to turn left across from the Beau Rivage for an interview, and told repeatedly that if I passed the Palace Casino Resort I had gone too far. While undoubtedly there are groups of individuals that protest the rising resorts, most of those that I spoke with had some sort of ties to the tourism industry and expressed a sense of adaptation, finding ways to use the tourists and the locale in their favor. For Biloxi descendants with extended lineages within the seafood industries, shifts away from these
occupations are met with increased fervor focused on heritage and visitors become the audience for their story telling. The rising number of outsiders coming through town allows for new and innovative ways to engage with personal and community heritage.

BILOXI SHRIMPING TRIP

Aboard the Biloxi Shrimping Trip the passengers, myself included, are taught the history of the city, the resiliency of the shrimping industry, the mechanics involved in trawling, and an assortment of sea creatures caught from the seafloor. Our captain, Johnny, gave us a historical account that dates back to the Native Americans with a brief introduction of the Croatian population and a proud personal identity as a self-proclaimed coonass\(^5\) with mixed Cajun ancestry. Kip, our guide, ran through the functions and processes of shrimping. He spoke quickly using terms only the seasoned shrimper is acquainted with. This spiel did not provide memorable information for the out of town passengers, but instead established his authority as a knowledgeable tour guide. For the tour to be authentic to the visitor, a sense of authority is necessary. In Edward Bruner’s (1994) discussion of New Salem, Illinois, a historic site taking the visitor back to the 1830s, the most salient argument is that of authority as it relates to authenticity. As he states,

The concept of authority serves as a corrective to misuses of the term *authenticity*, because in raising the issue of who authenticates, the nature of the discussion is changed. No longer is authenticity a property inherent in an object, forever fixed in time; it is seen as a struggle, a social process, in which competing interests argue for their own interpretation of history… when actors use the term *authenticity* ethnographers may then

\(^5\) The term coonass has a long history and, as Shana Walton (2003) describes, there are two different views of the word: as a racial slur and as an equivalent to the term redneck. According to Walton “both views basically agree on what ‘coonass’ references – rural, self-sustaining lifestyle, working class, and Acadian heritage” (2003:42). She goes on to say many Acadians do not focus on the historical racial slur but use the term in as a positive self-ascription.
ask what segment of society has raised a doubt, what is no longer taken for granted, what are the societal struggles, and what are the cultural issues at work. [1994:408]

By relaying Biloxi’s history and connecting himself to the region through family history and identity, Johnny establishes a kind of authority that validates the stories he tells. When Kip exhibits his knowledge of the mechanisms of shrimping, he creates a place of authority in which the tourists can rely on his recounting of the industry.

Both men were more than aware that for many aboard the most entertaining part is sifting through the catch full of crabs, fish, squid, and of course shrimp. Once the net was pulled in and the catch dropped on the deck, I asked our guide if this would be a good catch for a shrimper, as only a handful of shrimp flopped around in the midst of a pile of fish and crabs. “Of course not,” he said, but for their purposes aboard the tour it was perfect. As a family from Illinois excitedly snapped photos of a flock of seagulls nearby and reluctantly held, and dropped, squirming live shrimp it became clear that the purpose of the shrimp tour is not to have a real life shrimper’s experience but to reach an audience and engage with them in whichever way possible. Perhaps the boat, a double-decker tour boat with a small trawl attached to the stern, is far from a real trawl boat (Figure 1) and the tour “is navigated in the calm, protected waters between Deer Island and the Biloxi shoreline for your comfort” (BST flyer), but in the process pieces of Biloxi’s history and the world of shrimping are extended to new groups.

Furthermore, tours such as these create an occupational niche for ex-shrimpers and fishermen; it presents an economic outlet using previous occupational knowledge to increase one’s financial gain. Other coastal towns have seen similar changes with the proliferation of camps, or vacation-style fishing homes, and a variety of tours from alligator hunting to women’s fishing retreats. With the rise of camps along the Gulf waters, shrimpers and fishermen, such as Pete of Chauvin, find themselves acting as host and guide to visitors from all over the world.
Working for a larger company that owns a camp in Cocodrie, Louisiana, Pete and his wife take visitors out to do whatever they please, predominantly fishing and duck hunting, as well as accommodating their stay at the camp. David, a retired alligator hunter in Chauvin, takes visitors
out to kill their own alligator on his land. They visit for a weekend, staying on a houseboat in the bayou and David guides them through the marshy waters behind his house. Afterwards their alligator is processed and transformed into their very own leather items. Communities are constantly finding new uses for their environments, be it the scenic beachfront or the prime duck hunting real estate. As the financial benefits of shrimping steadily decrease, our captain, Johnny, raised in a shrimping family, is able to use his shrimping knowledge within the tourism industry. This isn’t a small business alternative. When we spoke in the summer of 2012 he said he typically receives approximately 30,000 - 40,000 customers any given summer each paying between ten and fifteen dollars (depending on age), but since the BP oil spill in 2010, a year in which they received an all-time low of roughly 5,000 customers, they’ve been working to steadily reach their old average.

Jonathan Corliss (2001) documented and analyzed similar tours in the fishing community of Gloucester, Massachusetts. Focusing on the shifting community identities of a region with a declining fishing industry and increasing success in the tourism industry, Corliss’s discussion of representation finds many congruencies with Biloxi. As Corliss states, “Describing hundreds of men busying themselves along roofs, parking lots, wharves, and ship rails during the height of the industry paints a more romantic image of the fishing lifestyle, but, more importantly emphasizes a history that can never disappear, regardless of the state of the current fishing economy” (2001:84). This sentiment of romanticism and history parallels the tour in Biloxi with its emphasis on how the beach was lined with factories and shrimp docks, how resilient men and women have been after storms and oil spills, and the resonant bravado of their claim to be the old Shrimp Capital of the World.
THE BILOXI BLESSING OF THE FLEET

The Biloxi Blessing of the Fleet has followed a similar path within the community, becoming an avenue for personal and local display of authenticity and heritage, of a romantic past and a shared history to an outside audience. Held on the Biloxi Town Green, the festival is easily accessible to residents and visitors alike, allowing people to wander in and find themselves engulfed in the symbolic onslaught of the shrimping lifestyle. The large open space is situated alongside the main road, Beach Boulevard, directly across from the beach and the Hard Rock Casino with its giant neon guitar welcoming you in. With signs advertising the festival scattered throughout town and easy parking, it’s no wonder the festival has a constant steady stream of participants. Karen, a key planner from the City of Biloxi, says the main effort of the City’s involvement is to procure and manage the donated space. Given its central location and easy access this donation is significant in reaching a wider audience and raising more money for the event. The event is produced through a series of donations, sponsorships, and fees for vendors’ space and general admission. All profits belong to the church, although as Father Mark stated, “They are starters for the next years’. It’s not a huge fundraiser. We don’t make a lot of money. It’s very expensive to put it on. We’re very fortunate we get donations and grants to put the festival on but we spend much of what we make. There is a little bit of profit, but not terribly a lot.” Three entities contribute to the festival’s production – St. Michael’s Catholic Church, the City of Biloxi, and, to a much lesser extent, Harrison County. Originally the City got involved in the planning because, according to Karen, they realized it was “so tied to cultural heritage they saw the need to continue it.” It is these ties to heritage that become the most prominent displays of authenticity and identity with such events as the coronation of Shrimp King and Queen and the Shrimp Boat Milk Carton Contest for elementary aged children.
There are deliberate displays of authenticity and heritage focused on reaching and engaging community members and visitors and then there are the unintentional effects of the tourism industry on the festival and the display of self. While the tourists have been intentionally drawn into the event and have become a large portion of the audience, the reality still stands that the attendance of many locals, especially shrimpers, has decreased. Of the thousands of visitors milling about the Town Green, a significant number are beach-goers and resort patrons. Wandering through the sea of vendors selling crafts, foods, and tickets for children’s rides I discovered that the ratio of local versus traveling vendors was roughly two to one and with about 60 vendors present this is substantial. Yet not all has turned over to the outsiders – the music stage held a steady stream of music throughout the day, all of which were local bands. Karen mentioned that her boss specifically chooses the biggest local bands around because they tend to have their own following that will come to the festival just to see them perform. The main issue, she continues, is that there are five major festivals going on in the area during the primetime Memorial Day weekend, making it difficult to book bands and vendors. Regardless, they make a strong effort to bring in the biggest local bands in town, along with the biggest number of followers; booking popular local bands has been one of the more successful ways they have garnered more attention and attracted more local festivalgoers.

One of the most visible realities of the shift away from shrimping and towards tourism is found in the boat blessing itself. The boat parade is held right offshore in the Gulf, between Deer Island and the wall of casinos on shore. The lead boat anchors out while participating boats line up and slowly parade by, receiving the blessing of the priest as they pass. As with most communities, having your boat chosen as the lead boat is an honor and comes with a certain level of prestige. In 2012 the lead boat was a clipper, a large double-decker tour boat, owned and
staffed by Ship Island Excursions. The parade itself had a solid number of boats participating, at least 40 to 50, but roughly five to six of those were working shrimp boats and even fewer, only three or four, had any kind of boat decorations. Instead leisure boats, sailboats, motorboats, and small yachts predominated the procession. In the seven years that Father Mark has been presiding over the Blessing of the Fleet, he says the biggest he’s ever seen boat participation was near 80 boats total and still only fifteen or so working boats.

In addition, there’s a loss of the particular associations with the boats in the parade. Working with shrimpers and fishermen it takes time to navigate their language; boats are often thrown into conversation and if you don’t know any better you may find yourself ten minutes into a discussion only to realize you’re talking about a boat, not a person. Relationships with boats become very strong, as exemplified by Mickey, a full time shrimper from Dulac, Louisiana. Mickey has three trawl boats and as we sat in his backyard looking out at the boats docked alongside the bayou he named them all to me, stopping specifically at the Sally Jane to tell her story. The Sally Jane is named after his five-year-old granddaughter that passed away in an automobile accident a few years prior. The emotional bonds to his beloved granddaughter, the dedication of his boat to her, and his yearly tradition of decorating the Sally Jane with angels and crosses for the boat parade all speak to the types of relationships and associations that can form between a boat and an individual. Connections such as these were not felt onboard the lead boat in Biloxi. Instead of commenting on Mickey’s granddaughter, Sally Jane, as one might do when the boat rides by during the Dulac boat parade, comments amongst the viewers involved what type of boat that one is, or how much it might have cost, and which ones they wish they could have. So while it is clear that the boat blessing is still important to many, it explicitly displays the local socio-economic changes away from the shrimping industry. Participants still find meaning
in the parade through their heritage and personal experiences, such as Mike Guthrie, mentioned previously, who proudly boasted of his father’s past Shrimp King title and young granddaughter’s place as the 2012 Shrimp Princess. Clearly his connection, both past and present, to the shrimping industry and the boat blessing is important, yet this is not symbolically represented during the parade as he and his family received the blessing aboard his large undecorated pleasure boat with its pristine white surface, tinted windows, and lounging deck, rather than a working shrimping vessel covered in nets and gear with flags and decorations.

ST. MICHAEL’S CATHOLIC CHURCH

St. Michael’s Catholic Church also exemplifies the socio-economic shift towards tourism and the social impacts of environmental issues. Titled the Church of the Fishermen, St. Michael’s is a beautiful church located across from the water on Beach Boulevard. Finished in 1964, the circular building is surrounded by 36 stained glass columns, each 45 feet tall, and topped with a seashell-like dome. This work of art is symbolically replete with images of the twelve apostles as fishermen throwing nets into the waters and catching fish (Figures 2 and 3).

The Fisherman’s Mass, held on Saturday, almost filled the church with around 175 people. It wasn’t until afterwards through further interviews that the demographics of those churchgoers became clear. It was suggested multiple times, by Karen and others, that the majority of the laypeople at Mass every Sunday are actually just tourists from the casinos, implying either local people were no longer going to church or moved out of the area. According to Father Mark, without a stable residential population many were concerned that the church would close, but in fact the visitors attending Mass every Sunday have significantly contributed to the church’s financial stability.
Figure 2
The stained glass columns surrounding St. Michael’s Catholic Church in Biloxi. The imagery draws on the apostles as fishermen, holding nets and catching fish.

Figure 3
The shell-like dome of St. Michael’s Catholic Church with a casino towering in the background.
Father Mark came to St. Michael’s from New Orleans a few months after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. According to him and others, many local residents moved slightly north, further inland after the storm, and didn’t return to their neighborhoods or their local parish. Hurricane Katrina now holds a powerful place in local and personal histories all along the Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf Coasts. The storm devastated the church, severely damaging the main circular building and completely wiping out its Family Life Center. While the church has been completely restored, only recently have plans fully developed to begin rebuilding the Family Life Center. Only months after Hurricane Katrina, Father Mark walked into his first Blessing of the Fleet. The funds weren’t there and only five boats participated but it was necessary according to Father Mark,

It was not only an emotional experience but it was a connector of the past that still Katrina didn’t destroy. It was an emotional stability to keep moving on and we’re obviously recuperating much better since then. But it’s always gratifying and edifying of what people, communities, will hold on to in times of difficulty. Blessing of the Fleet is church-based, as well as family-based and community-based, all of Biloxi helps, so it touches and reaches not just spiritual, but economics, social, political, it’s very pervasive.

After Hurricane Katrina, the Biloxi Blessing of the Fleet was a statement of resiliency for its participants and became a way for festivalgoers to reconcile, not only the physical damages of their city, but the destruction of key attributes to their own identities. And while many of those that moved out of the area come back to the parish regularly from the nearby towns of Gulfport or Ocean Springs, it still remains that at least a third of the church population comes from the casinos. Father Mark is not oblivious to this; in fact he’s more than aware. “That [visitor] keeps us alive. We’re praying that more casinos develop and move in because that will push those, their guests, to come to church here. And they do, they come. But as far as a residential population, that’s not too likely to happen.” Not only is St. Michael’s facing the harsh realities of an emigrating population, but the church is also practicing the same resourcefulness that many
other community members utilize. They are working with the tourism industry to find ways to maintain their own traditions and keep the church around for the local two-thirds of the congregation.

St. Michael’s is not the only church that raises money through a combination of collections and festival funds. In the past, boat blessings in Chauvin and Golden Meadow, Louisiana were a strong source of income for the churches. St. Joseph’s Catholic Church in Chauvin raised substantial funds from their annual festivals. The Blessing of the Fleet was held in the spring and in the fall the community held Lagniappe on the Bayou, a weekend-long festival that brought the church hundreds of thousands of dollars every year. A true community endeavor, the festival ran for 25 years, ending in 1994. Each year families would gather on the church grounds and set up booths selling games, raffles, and home cooked foods. Community members have a pervasive nostalgia for the event, with one Chauvin native stating, “When we lost the church fair we lost a lot of community bonding.” Memories of the Lagniappe are strong and, 20 years later, the funds raised are just as important. At a time when the church was in debt, Father Trahan explained, 

I guess the most we made was around 1982; we made $481,000 in three days. Little nickels and pennies you know? And of course we made a profit of about 200 [thousand] and something that year. Paid off the debt. Got free from all of that. And then the next couple of fairs we saved the money. And it’s still helping us today because the interest that we get on the money helps run the church. Our collection only covers about 52 percent of our expenses, so without that money from the fair making interest we would have to stop half the things we’re doing.

Although Golden Meadow had no equivalent to the Lagniappe on the Bayou they have used the Blessing of the Fleet to fund the church throughout its history. Proudly proclaimed as the oldest Blessing of the Fleet, Golden Meadow celebrated its 98th anniversary in 2012. The festival dates back before the church, Our Lady of Prompt Succor, was even built and it is
through the funds raised at the Blessing of the Fleet’s gumbo dinner that construction on the original church in 1922 and the current church, built in 1952, began. Throughout the years it grew larger to include an Admiral’s Ball and a fair on the Saturday prior to the Blessing.

Margaret works at Our Lady of Prompt Succor Church and has been a lifelong member of the church and community. She says that, “they raised tons of money. I think the least amount was one year we only netted $12,000. That was a really bad year. But then the next year we went up to $60,000. Basically that’s how we got the money for everything.” Both St. Joseph’s and Our Lady of Prompt Succor are a part of the Houma-Thibodaux diocese and in 1985 Bishop Boudreaux mandated that, as Father Trahan of Chauvin put it, “all support of the church was going to come from stewardship, the collections on Sunday.” He gave a grace period of ten years for outside forms of fundraising to come to an end and since 1995 neither church has utilized their festivals to raise any money. Published in the official Houma-Thibodaux diocese weekly newspaper, *Bayou Catholic* (now a monthly magazine), the mandate is given a single sentence within the extensive history of diocese – “In that same year, [1985] Bishop Boudreaux issued a policy to rid the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux of all gambling and fairs as a means of church support” (Vicknair and Chatagnier 2011:70). Despite the unimportance associated with the event in the diocese history, for the churches affected the policy holds a pivotal place in local histories.

In both the past and present, Blessing of the Fleet festivals have relied on the visitor in numerous ways. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1997) discusses three significant implications of self-presentation inside and outside the tourism industry. First, there are times when the tourist context may become the only venue for the performance of cultural traditions. While that is not the case for the Blessing of the Fleet, it is undeniable that the influx of visitors throughout each event’s history has helped to sustain the festivals (and the churches) in times of low participation.
or economic hardships. Second, because tourism is a broadcast medium, “performances of identity at these sites are in turn amplified through tourism – they are repeated, canonized, clarified, and seen and recorded by a flow of visitors” (1997:4). This ties together with her final point, that “tourism can be catalytic in the elaboration of heritage in local contexts, even when tourists are not there” (1997:4). In this way, a place like Biloxi can be seen as reifying and preserving personal identities and histories related to the shrimping industry as families are economically forced to move into separate fields or as resorts and casinos continue to rise up around them. The Blessing of the Fleet becomes an event that performs and expands connections to the shrimping industry and, more broadly, the Gulf region. While tourism has impacted the face of the festival, participants are able to negotiate these changes and use tourism as an avenue for representing, celebrating, and sharing their heritage with themselves and the wider audience.
CHAPTER FOUR: “WE RUN THIS LIKE A BUSINESS”

Morgan City, located in St. Mary Parish in southern Louisiana, is surrounded by water, most prominently Berwick Bay and Lake Palourde, and finds itself more generally positioned north of the Atchafalaya Bay. While sugar plantations were the dominant economic force in the 1800s, the first three decades of the 20th century in Morgan City were marked by the rapid rise of the timber industry, specifically cypress. It was then in the 1930s, after the lumber resources had been exhausted in the region, that shrimping came to be a powerful industry in the area; consequently the Morgan City Blessing of the Fleet began in the mid-1930s (Austin 2008). Oil was found in the region as early as 1900, but it wasn’t until 1935, and the discovery of the Jeanerette field, that the oil and gas industry began providing employment to the area (Austin 2008). Diane Austin’s (2008) anthropological report, produced for the U.S. Department of Interior’s Minerals Management Services (now BOEM), utilizes extensive oral histories with long time residents and oil field workers from Morgan City and surrounding areas to understand the history and development of the offshore petroleum industry. One participant, TR Naquin, recalls the changing economy:

This old boy from Florida sent one of his shrimp boats down here to fish out of Morgan City, and, shrimping, he made a one-day trip and was about to sink his boat with the shrimp. So he calls back to Florida and tells his boss. “I made a one-day trip and almost sank the boat.” And the next day, you know, there was about 10 or 15 boats coming from Florida to Morgan City and that was the start of the shrimping industry. And that was in the ‘30’s, late ‘30’s and ‘40’s. And then [it was] in the ‘50’s, when the oil field took a hold. So it went from lumber to shrimp to oil… [Austin 2008:23-34]

As Mr. Naquin suggests, oil became the dominant force in the area by the 1950s. As a prominent port city with a flat topography and direct access to the Atchafalaya River Morgan City developed in congruence with the oil industry and saw an increase of employment in
mining, manufacturing, transportation, and commercial oil diving. Another oral history contributor, Lester Fryou, describes the shift towards oil,

Morgan City, at that time, was strictly fishing, shrimping. A lot of shrimping. The docks in Morgan City, you had boats there five, six, abreast, all along the dock… One thing about shrimping, more and more people got into the shrimping business and started depleting the industry. And then you start getting this oil company-related work in here. It was paying good. [Austin 2008:84]

Although the economic changes favored the prosperous oil industry over the shrimping industry and the two industries developed during overlapping time periods, as Allen Alford, a scholar of theatre and performance, points out, “Shrimping provided both economic and cultural identity to the area through its application of newfound wealth and ancient traditions. Oil never presented a set of ritual symbols that was embraced by the public” (2003:143). In this way, Alford suggests that the Louisiana Shrimp Festival maintained a shrimping identity long after 1967 when it became the Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival.

As previously mentioned extensive social science research has been sponsored by the Environmental Studies Program of the Minerals Management Service (MMS, now BOEM), a part of the US Department of the Interior, between 2001 and 2006. Led by Diane Austin and Thomas McGuire, a team of researchers conducted oral history interviews with individuals that lived and/or worked in southern Louisiana or Houston, Texas during the early decades of the offshore oil industry (Austin 2008). With nearly 450 oral histories, the corpus includes a large number of participants claiming Morgan City as their home. Their stories have supplemented my understanding of the socio-economic history of the region and how the festival has developed out of it. For instance, P.T. Bailey’s oral history provides a glimpse into the interactions between shrimping and oil. Born in Morgan City in 1927, Mr. Bailey spent twenty years as a trawler before he joined the Navy. Upon his return he began again in the shrimping business. It wasn’t
long before he realized that the money wasn’t there and in 1966 he started his career in the oil industry. After rising through the ranks within the oil fields for decades Mr. Bailey settled back at home and opened a seafood business, but refrained from returning to the hard and unprofitable labor of trawling (Austin 2008). This brief example illustrates the interactions between shrimping and oil found in the personal lives of coastal workers during the 20th century. Personal histories such as these exemplify the symbolic presence of shrimp and oil within the festival; the Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum festival logo, a jumbo shrimp wearing a hardhat wrapped around an oil derrick, comes to life in stories such as these (Figure 4).

As previously mentioned, the Blessing of the Fleet began in Morgan City in the mid-1930s and about thirty years later, in 1967, the “marriage of shrimp and oil took place that would forever change the face of the festival,” as the festival’s website proudly proclaims (www.shrimp-petrofest.org). This “marriage” has taken its most tangible form in the boat parade which now consists of more tug boats than trawlers and the symbolic “kiss” between the two lead boats, traditionally one shrimp and one oil. The tradition, beginning in 1978, is that two boats initiate the blessing as they come together bow to bow. The Shrimp and Petroleum King and Queen are on each boat and together toast one another when the bows touch. One Shrimp and Petroleum Queen described to me her experience during the toast:

It was frightening though this year because I had to toast the king when the two boats came together. Being scared of heights is not a good thing when you have to climb a ladder then drink champagne. The funniest was that they tied a string to my crown but not to me. I asked why they were not tying a rope to me – what if I fall? The response
was “You can swim. Your crown cannot.” It made for a very funny picture and story in the newspaper. I climbed about halfway up, looked down, and froze. Luckily, my king is much shorter than me so it worked out.

As the festival has grown much of this direct and symbolic connection to the industries has subsided. The 2012 “kiss,” for instance, was between two tugboats; no shrimp boats were available or able to take time off for the occasion (Figure 5). What is significant about the festival is not only the intertwining of oil and shrimp but the commercialization and popularity of the festival itself. The festival has become one of the largest free events in the state with an average between 80,000 to 125,000 festivalgoers over the course of the four-day weekend. It has

Figure 5
The 2012 kiss during the boat blessing in Morgan City. Two tugboats coming together – the king and queen are each on one boat and meet to toast during the kiss.
transformed into a commercially viable event and represents not only economic identities but a local identity that incorporates the festival and its notoriety. As Guss points out, “Instead of simply dissolving into a market-driven global culturescape, these forms may actually enlarge their semantic fields. The expanded audiences and contexts created by such forces as urbanization, tourism, and new technology, to name but three, may multiply rather than reduce the range of meanings suggested by these events” (2000:4). The popularity and commercialization of the event have increased the significance of the festival within local identities and the influx of outside visitors has multiplied the meanings and experiences of the festival.

To accommodate its growing attendance the festival now envelops the length of four city blocks in the downtown area of Morgan City (Figure 6). The spread includes a music stage, children’s center, and assortment of local food vendors within the open space of Lawrence Park. Awkwardly, yet pragmatically, situated two blocks over, beneath the US 90 overpass are all of the vendors selling crafts and foods along with an entire fair replete with a Ferris wheel and carnival games. Surrounded by concrete above and below it may seem an unlikely place for a festival but it comes with the added bonus of protection against Figure 6
unpredictable weather. Scattered throughout the rest of the downtown area are smaller events including a car show held at nearby school, the boat blessing held off the docks on Berwick Bay, and the Culture and Heritage Expo located adjacent to the Festival Office, all within walking distance of each other. The downtown area is filled with people milling about the entire weekend long, people spending money.

One of the most striking and initial differences that I noticed when I began working in Morgan City is that instead of searching for festival planners through the local parish church, I easily found phone numbers online to contact festival employees. The Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival maintains its own offices and employs two salaried staff members to run the show. Louis Delaforetaine, Morgan City born and raised and a lifelong festival attendee, is the overseer of everything festival-related and became an invaluable contributor to my research. During our first meeting it was clear that he was unsure of my purpose; he deals with reporters on a regular basis and has grown accustomed to presenting the festival in a media-friendly light. About forty-five minutes into our initial meeting he became less rigid and began opening up about the behind the scenes dealings and the different issues that come about in these situations. Through our meetings the numbers and statistics of the festival astounded me, but as I later investigated I discovered there were no hard statistics to verify many of the claims, specifically regarding participation numbers and demographics. More easily quantifiable were the 170 available vendor slots beneath the US 90 overpass that were all were filled in 2012. Unfortunately Hurricane Isaac settled on the southern parts of Louisiana that year, raining for days immediately prior to the festival. While very little was affected on the production-end of the festival, at least ten vendors cancelled. What is most important to note is that of the 170 vendors, including crafts and foods, according to Louis, roughly ten percent are local, coming from
Morgan City or the neighboring towns of Patterson, Berwick, or Amelia. It is a staggering ratio of traveling vendors to local, even compared to that of Biloxi where the ratio was two traveling vendors for every one local vendor. How are local representations of identity and history portrayed in the production and consumption of foods and crafts if only ten percent of the vendors are a part of that local region?

Not included in the 170 vendors is the strip of 10 to 15 local sellers located along the boundaries of Lawrence Park. Titled the Cajun Culinary Classic these vendors include local restaurants, church groups, and other nonprofit organizations. Their space is donated by the festival and positioned such that they are distanced from the other vendors; for those relaxing in Lawrence Park or enjoying the band their closest food options are these local stands along the border. These vendors raise substantial funds during the weekend. One of most popular food vendors in the Cajun Culinary Classic is a church group that sells hamburgers and, according to Louis, raises up to $60,000 over the festival weekend. In addition to these local vendors there are only three alcohol sellers in the entire festival located in Lawrence Park, two selling beer and one selling hurricanes which one festivalgoer warned me against, saying I should drink it only if “you like battery acid.” These three sellers are also local nonprofit organizations, including a church group and retiree organization, that are donated the space and permitted to be the only alcohol vendors in the festival. The terms stipulate that a portion (unspecified to me) of the funds raised from the selling of alcohol goes towards the festival and the rest remains with the seller.

Any attempt I made during formal and informal interviews to learn how much money is made during the course of the event was typically shot down with generalized statements and roundabout answers. Eventually I began to understand how the festival functions on the inside. The Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival is registered as a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization.
Organizations under this designation are associated with social welfare and civic issues with net earnings belonging exclusively to charitable, educational, or recreational purposes. In addition, this categorization differs distinctly from a 501(c)(3) nonprofit by allowing a certain degree of political activity. While the organization cannot directly or indirectly participate in political campaigns on behalf of or in opposition to a particular candidate, they are able to use their funds within the political sphere as long as it is directly related to the promotion of social welfare. This adds an extra layer to the power and capabilities of both the festival and the contributors, specifically oil companies. There is a Festival Association Board of thirteen members that oversees all major decisions regarding the festival and it is understood that they have various forms of corporate backing associated with a sort of monetary power. Money from the festival comes through multiple avenues that are not directly related to revenue raised during the weekend. Sponsorships play a vital role as businesses seek advertisement in the numerous pamphlets circulating the festival grounds or upon signs and posters, exemplified in the overabundance of BP logos plastered all over the Children’s Village entrance (Figure 7). Memberships also bring in money for the festival, as do in-kind sponsorship including donations from individuals, companies, the city, etc. “We run this like a business,” Louis often says.

A critical difference between the Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival and other boat blessings is the deliberate focus on accommodating the visitor as opposed to an emphasis on personal and local heritage. Louis is often concerned with how to improve the festival in ways that will accommodate and appeal to the visitor coming for a fun weekend getaway, be it from nearby Patterson, Baton Rouge and New Orleans, or even further, from Texas or Mississippi. Currently he utilizes an online survey on the festival website where participants answer questions as to why they are coming and how they heard about the festival. Questions include “Where did
you see or hear about our festival?” and “Do you plan on staying at a hotel or campground? If so, which hotel or campground?” (www.shrimp-petrofest.org). He checks the results frequently and is hoping to make the survey more popular as he sees it as a beneficial tool. For instance, he found that 100 percent of the responders chose food and music as an answer to the question “What do you think you would enjoy while attending our festival?” while heritage was chosen about 50 percent of the time. By asking where people plan to stay and what merchants they plan on visiting off festival grounds this tool also provides information regarding another commercial aspect of the festival – the use of local businesses during visitors’ stays. The arrival of
festivalgoers during the four-day weekend provides local businesses with an influx in tourists staying at hotels, campgrounds, and dining at restaurants. Secondary spending, money not spent at the festival itself, creates another financial stimulus for the community.

How have these commercial impacts affected the festival? Oftentimes scholars and participants, alike, associate a rise in commercialism and the tourist draw with a decrease in authenticity. In DeLyser’s discussion of Bodie State Historic Park, a California Ghost Town, she mentions that, “commercialization, according to staff and visitors, detracts from the ghost-town experience because it interferes with their ability to imagine life in another time” (1999:617). I find that this is not the case with the Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival. While the festival has transitioned away from an event specifically focused on the shrimping and oil industries, the constant support and attendance by festivalgoers suggests that the festival is important and individuals find various meanings through experiences during the annual weekend. For one traveling vendor from Gulfport, Mississippi, the Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival is always the first stop on her annual festival tour. Being from Gulfport she is well acquainted with the neighboring Biloxi Blessing of the Fleet and although she no longer attends due to scheduling conflicts she knows the festival well. Later in the day I spoke with the local graphic designer who designs the festival T-shirt every year and it was clear his experiences influenced the meanings he attaches to the festival and the resulting T-shirt graphics. Candace finds meaning in her title as Shrimp and Petroleum Queen and its extended history within her family.

My grandfather was a shrimper along with his brother. The tradition used to be that whoever caught the most shrimp became king. That tradition died out when the shrimpers became less and less. He was king in 1968. Both of his daughters, my aunts, ran for queen, but they were only maids. His brother was king in 1958 and is still on the board. His daughter was queen in 1976.
For the larger Morgan City community the significance of the event has shed its immediate connection to shrimping and oil and now centers on the festival itself. The festival has become the pride of the town. Its notoriety and awards throughout the state, as well as its ability to draw in nearly 100,000 visitors from all over Louisiana and neighboring states have become its focus. The masthead of the local newspaper, The Daily Review, reads “Home of the Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival.” Everyday they proudly display the local prestige associated with the annual event. The main goal of festival planners and local participants is not asking, “How can we represent our socio-economic heritage to a wider audience?” but “How can we put on the best festival yet?” The concern now is maintaining the prestige and notoriety associated with the widely popular event and local pride revolves around the festival just as much as, if not more than, the industries it seeks to represent.

Producing a better festival year after year means engaging multiple audiences. As a tourist attraction the festival needs to appeal to a wider, at times national, audience. In 2010 after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill all eyes were on the festival. Louis said he gave 85 interviews that year, including the New York Times and international media sources. That turned out to be one of the biggest years with about 250,000 visitors. In addition to attracting visitors, a better festival also needs to appease the local community and reflect, engage, and examine local identities. What would the festival be without local support, enthusiasm, and pride? If local identities are neglected, Morgan City would simply become a venue and the festival would lose its history and sense of place. Lastly, as Alford (2003) points out, the festival also provides a venue for the oil and shrimping industries to establish their symbolic presence within the community identity as they experience socio-economic changes throughout history. As the Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival has become increasingly commercialized and larger in
size it has created multiple meanings and become an avenue for multiple displays of power, prestige, identity, and heritage.
CHAPTER FIVE: HERITAGE DISPLAYS

SHifting economic landscapes

The seafood industries have long played a prominent role in the coastal areas of Louisiana and Mississippi. The wetland environment shaped by the Mississippi River has created an ecosystem rife with an abundance of seafood. Families have shrimped, fished, crabbed, and farmed oysters in the Gulf of Mexico not only for financial livelihood but as a means of providing food for their own. At the turn of the 20th century oil companies began moving into the area; during this time the region was teeming with seafood and held a powerful reservoir of oil. The incoming industry opened up volumes of employment opportunities for the coastal residents. The demand for oil has yet to cease, rising higher and higher while the production of and demand for domestic shrimp has fallen, in large part due to a decline in profitability and an increase in foreign imports. Additionally, in recent decades, the tourism industry has steadily grown in the region.

As exhibited by the monumental rise in tourism previously discussed in Biloxi, Mississippi and the significant increase in camps, or leisure sporting homes, in areas such as Cocodrie, Louisiana, tourism has transformed the economic landscape. Excursions such as ecotours and chartered fishing trips have created new job opportunities for small businesses or individuals previously a part of more traditional seafood industries. Economic shifts, combined with growing political and environmental issues, have created a setting in which many shrimpers’ livelihoods are drastically changing. The experience of being a shrimper today is notably different than previous generations and this has resulted in a significant number of people moving into other occupations, such as the oil field, or moving away altogether.
discussed current politico-economic issues with the roughly fifteen individuals I met who are or have been a part of the shrimping industry they brought up three distinct issues: rising gas prices, lower shrimp prices, and government regulations. Rising gas prices are felt throughout the nation, but when a shrimper is spending over a thousand dollars to fuel his boat per trip, it is necessary to have a substantial profit for the trip to be worthwhile. In addition, buyers are able to purchase shrimp from countries in East and Southeast Asia at significantly reduced rates; lower wages and the implementation of shrimping farms allows for such low import prices. In turn, this drops the selling prices for domestic shrimp and steadily decreases the profit margin.

Government regulations play a role in the imports but direct problems between seafood workers and government entities stem from federal laws requiring turtle excluder devices (TEDs) and the state-operated Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA), under the U.S. Department of Commerce, published the first federal regulations for TEDs in 1987. They are metal grids inserted into the net that allow larger animals to escape, but in the process they lose part of the catch. Opinions on TEDs differ amongst shrimpers, yet people across the board attest to rarely catching turtles in the first place; most people I spoke with, whether they mind them or not, see the TEDs as relatively unnecessary. Legislation is currently being developed at the state level in Louisiana to require TEDs for smaller inland boats, an issue that shrimpers argue may produce serious problems as it threatens to even further diminish the size of a catch that is already decreasing in profitability. Mickey has been shrimping in Louisiana for forty years. While he doesn’t view TEDs as a major issue, even describing them as a “blessing in disguise,” he finds the pending enforcement of TEDs on small inshore boats as problematic. He says, “We’re not killing those turtles like we’re
being blamed for” and claims he’s caught, at most, 100 turtles during his 40 year career, few of which, if any, were caught inland.

The Department of Wildlife and Fisheries is a constant source of animosity for shrimpers. Some have expressed problems with individual officers and personal confrontations that resulted, in one instance, in the fisherman installing cameras onboard to capture any future altercations. Some shrimpers place part of the blame for the poor shrimp seasons on the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries’ decision to open the shrimping season too early, resulting in smaller shrimp and, consequently, lower prices. Pam runs a very profitable shrimp dock, owns three shrimp boats (which her husband operates), and is known throughout the community as a strong voice in the public and political spheres. She and her family are active participants in the boat blessing and she attributes the decreased participation in the boat parade to the opening of the seasons. Her family had recently won first place in the Chauvin boat decoration contest, making them the lead boat in the following year’s parade. Unfortunately, because the shrimp season opened just days before the boat blessing her family was unable to participate. She claims that the department understands that the Blessing of the Fleet is a cultural tradition and yet chooses to ignore it, opening the season before the festival and therefore preventing individuals from celebrating their cherished traditions.

The Department of Wildlife and Fisheries is not the only source cited for the repeatedly poor seasons. More than anything both scholars and fishermen report that the poor seasons are a direct result of the growing environmental issues affecting the region. Frequently interview participants initially misinterpreted my research and assumed I was interested in environmental issues evidenced by the extensive storytelling describing the land that used to be there. Located at the mouth of the Mississippi River, coastal Louisiana’s distinct formation has created a lush
marshland ideal for the development of thriving fishing industries. As the oil industry entered into the area, canals were forged for navigation and pipelines with little concern for the environmental repercussions. As time has passed many of these canals have widened, eroding nearby land. Furthermore the diversion of the Mississippi River, in an effort to control the flow and direction of the water through key ports in New Orleans and Baton Rouge, halted the natural movements of the delta resulting in more land loss. The results have been drastic, as land loss and salt-water intrusion have created less and less conducive environments for the flourishing of shrimp, crabs, oysters, and various species of fish. In addition, the location alongside the Gulf of Mexico makes the region prone to destructive hurricanes.

While national media coverage has surrounded recent storms in Louisiana they are quick to leave the national consciousness; the same cannot be said for the residents directly impacted. The aftermath stays in the memories of locals for years. In my experience doing ethnographic interviews countless times people referred to a storm by name with the assumption that I already knew when it was, what kinds of damages it caused, and how they have since recovered. Repeatedly I proved their assumptions wrong when not only did I have to ask when the storm occurred but, first, who is Betsy or Gus?

The 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf has produced innumerable legal difficulties and economic downturns for shrimpers and almost all of the seafood workers I spoke with have doubts and concerns about the future of the seafood industries as a result. Harold is a commercial fisherman from Pointe aux Chenes, Louisiana. For almost 40 years he has practiced commercial fishing, shrimping, crabbing, and oystering. Although he knew my research was not focused on the oil spill, we were constantly talking about the issues he’s dealt with in shrimping and oystering, specifically, and his skeptical outlook towards the government and big
corporations. When we met in the summer of 2012, Harold told me he had not shrimped or crabbed since the spill in 2010. His oyster beds were destroyed and he had yet to begin cultivating any new oysters. As a result of the oil spill, legal claims and lawsuits have impacted the lives of almost every fishermen and each has his or her own story to tell of the personal difficulties faced since the spill. Social scientists from the University of Arizona and Louisiana State University, funded by the U.S. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM), have worked to investigate the social impacts of the Deepwater Horizon spill on the Gulf Coast region (UA 2011).

With all of these problems weighing on the livelihoods of shrimpers it is no wonder that many choose to leave the industry and pursue other occupations. Employment in the oil field provides an individual with two major securities that shrimping lacks: salaried pay and insurance benefits. Jim, an ex-shrimper from Chauvin, explained his decision to switch fields,

When I go to work, I come home, I get paid. You go shrimping it’s not a guarantee. You may go fishing and come back and owe money. If there’s a natural occurrence, storms, and you can’t fish for two or three months out of the year because of weather, after a storm you’re repairing, or even the seabed itself is not stable enough to go without catching too much trash. Then you may not make anything that year. So there’s no guaranteeing in fishing. So when you’re looking at the newer families coming up that want to buy a home, want to get a car, you need to know you’re going to get paid. There’s no way to go out on a promise that I can bring you on this boat and we’re going to promise you this much. See when I go to work I’m guaranteed so many hours and the dollar signs are assigned to those hours and you get whatever’s coming to you. But you don’t in fishing. And a lot of the locals here that fish for a living, and when I’m saying fishing I’m basically saying shrimping, when they’re fishing and the season is over you’ve got to find something else to do. So a lot of them will wear a different hat; they’ll shrimp in the shrimp season, they’ll oyster during the oyster season, and they’ll crab the rest of the time.

Shrimpers depend on the catch they bring in for the bulk of their income and the going rates are not always in favor of the shrimper. It becomes stressful, worrying about whether you will catch enough to cover your expenses or if the shrimp prices will drop by the time you return ten days
later. In contrast, working on the oilrigs provides a steady income and insurance benefits, which many fishermen do not have. And while there are men who work in both industries, it is more common in my encounters that shrimping becomes supplemental – men in the oil field shrimp on their time off for their own personal use or for a little extra cash every once in a while. As individuals remove themselves from the seafood industries and move towards different career choices they are forced to negotiate their identities as shrimpers, fishermen, or crabbers. Family histories and personal experiences are intrinsically tied to these occupations and individuals are developing means to coping with this growing distance. Despite shifts into other industries many people are able to maintain their connections through an increased focus on personal and community heritage.

PAGEANTRY AND THE MILK CARTON SHRIMP BOAT CONTEST

Among the three festivals held in Biloxi, Morgan City, and Chauvin there are a plethora of implicit and explicit connections between shrimping heritage and the event, created and presented in a variety of forms from pageantry to boat decorations to exhibits. As the daily experiences of festival participants shift with the changing socio-economic landscape so does the development and presentation of self at the festival. The growing distance between shrimping as livelihood and shrimping as heritage is evidenced by the many different forms of heritage display used by festival participants, be they organizers, boat paraders, or visiting out-of-towners. Organizers, such as those in Morgan City and Biloxi, are in charge of selecting music, the layout of the festival, and controlling who and what is presented as a part of the festival. Boat participants decorate their boats and in doing so display what they find important in their personal heritage and the tradition as a whole. At the Chauvin Boat Blessing in 2013, I spoke
with many visitors at the local sculpture garden where Nicholls State University holds a biennial folk festival. Many had traveled to town to volunteer with environmental organizations and were attending the festival to get a taste of the land they were helping to preserve. Others were visiting from a few towns over, some with connections to Chauvin, others bringing an outsider to view the spectacle. For example, a man from the neighboring town of Dularge brought his LSU professor from North Dakota to experience the event and even contacted the church so they could ride along on the lead boat.

It was in Biloxi that the focus on heritage first drew my attention; in a town overtaken by the more lucrative tourism industry, the movement away from the seafood industries cannot be denied. Individuals are acutely aware of the socio-economic changes within the larger community and their own personal lives. In turn, festival planners have explicitly emphasized heritage and the ability to connect and remember one’s own history. In Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s discussion of heritage as a mark of modernity she states,

> While persistence in old lifeways may not be economically viable and may well be inconsistent with economic development and with national ideologies, the valorization of those lifeways as heritage (and integration of heritage into economies of cultural tourism) is economically viable, is consistent with economic development theory, and can be brought into line with national ideologies of cultural uniqueness and modernity. [2006: 183]

It is the “valorization” of shrimping lifeways and the romanticized past that has become heritage and is displayed through the Blessing of the Fleet. Two key examples of this are found in the Shrimp King and Queen pageant and the Milk Carton Shrimp Boat Contest. The creators of these two events designed them to be both educational tools for the participants and symbolic displays to festivalgoers.

The coronation of the Shrimp King and Queen is one of the main attractions on the Saturday of the festival. The event is held on its own stage within the festival layout immediately
following the Fisherman’s Mass. I was surprised when I arrived to the coronation ceremony and the bleachers and chairs were filled; the rest of the crowd, including myself, gathered around standing and sitting on the available grass and sidewalk (Figure 8).

As the ceremony began, the outgoing king and queen took the stage ready to pass on their titles. The king was announced first. Each year an older man from the community is chosen as the Shrimp King – a man with an extended history and connection to the shrimping industry to symbolically link the ceremony to the power of seafood within the community. The king for 2012 was the president of a local seafood company. He has also served on the Port Commission and was a member of the American Shrimp Processors Association. The title of Shrimp King
adds to their lists of credentials and follows them throughout the rest of their lives. Within the first five minutes of our meeting, Mike Guthrie boasted of his father’s title as a past Shrimp King and later when he walked past us by he pulled the ex-King over for me to meet. Becoming Shrimp King symbolically represents the success of the shrimping industry to the audience while simultaneously reifying one’s personal and familial heritage.

While the king is nominated by his peers, past kings and other men with an extended history in the shrimping industry, based on his list of credentials and business merits, in contrast the position of Shrimp Queen is an active contest among six young self-nominated women. These young women between the ages of 16 and 19 are representatives of the community heritage, of family histories, and serve as a symbol of the future of shrimping. In order to participate each contestant is required to submit a personal family tree illustrating direct connections to the shrimping industry as well as an essay discussing the importance of shrimping within her family and personal history. As Father Mark stated,

The pageant is a reminder of family because the girls who come into that experience have to identify their connection through bloodline of somebody having an association with shrimping and the industry. Then they have to know how did their family influence them? Do they still have the same values of faith? Of environmental awareness? Of a willingness to stand up for what we’re preserving and keep it going?

In this way Father Mark is encompassing a negotiation that festivalgoers are dealing with – how have things changed and how have we worked to maintain and preserve those qualities we find important? Not all components of the contest are so symbolically significant. Participants compete to procure ad sponsorship from local businesses, many seafood-related but not exclusively; ads are then printed in a free booklet handed out during the coronation ceremony. Winners receive more than notoriety and a diamond-encrusted tiara – scholarships are awarded for first, second, and third place as well as most sponsors accumulated and miss congeniality.
Once the winners are announced the crowd disperses but this is not the end of the king and queen’s role; the following day king and queen stand proudly at the bow of the lead boat waving to passing boats as they receive their blessings.

Pageantry, and its symbolic connotations, are not unique to Biloxi and a similar contest occurs in Morgan City at the Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival; an older established man in the community is nominated as King and having young women compete for the Queen’s crown. Again, the older king is representative of prosperity and history while the young women signify the future and the perpetuation of tradition. In the past, the king was chosen based on who brought in the most shrimp; later, after the oil industry joined the festival it was chosen in a similar fashion to Biloxi. For instance, the 2012 Shrimp and Petroleum King owns an offshore rental company, providing equipment rental services for the offshore oil and gas industry, and has held leadership positions on boards in such organizations as the Petroleum Club and the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry. Key differences stand out within the application process for queen; the evidence of direct shrimping lineage and a tangible understanding of the impact of shrimping heritage on personal and family lives are not required in Morgan City.

Candace described her application process to me,

Shrimp and Petroleum is different from every other pageant because it is not a pageant. We fill out an application like every other festival, and the application is used in the interview. The judges might say something like “I see you attend LSU. How do you like it? The interview is held in June – three months before the coronation. It’s a tea and one girl is called into the interview room at a time while everyone else visits with the reigning queen. We are asked questions strictly about ourselves – what we like about the festival, where we go to school, if we have time to be queen, why we want to be queen, etc. The judges want to know your personality because they want a queen who will go out and promote the festival.

While the explicit representations of heritage are not as necessary, nonetheless the prestige of the title and the notoriety associated with it are just as important. The Shrimp and Petroleum Queen
becomes a representative for the festival, the community, and the shrimping and oil industry throughout the year, as she is contractually obligated to attend ten or more festivals throughout the state as the visiting Shrimp and Petroleum Queen. Candace recognizes her role, saying,

I have gotten to do so many wonderful things with this title. And it’s not just about me. I realized in Washington DC [at the Mystic Krewe of Louisiana’s Washington DC Mardi Gras] that I represent something so much greater than myself. With this title, I represent every shrimper, every oilman, every person in Morgan City, Berwick, and Patterson. It’s incredible. Everywhere I go I always keep that in mind.

It is clear that these pageants stand as a continued tradition with their significance stemming from an extended history within the event and the symbolic meanings of shrimping, community, and heritage.

Another contest, one found only in Biloxi, is the Milk Carton Shrimp Boat Contest. Linda Gillespie, mother and member of the Blessing of the Fleet committee, initiated the contest a few years ago in an attempt to bridge the disconnect between younger children and their own shrimping heritage. The goal is for participants to create and construct model shrimp boats using recycled milk cartons (Figure 9). The contest is open to all fourth- and fifth-grade students along the Gulf Coast and the only requirement is that milk cartons are used to build the structures. Linda says she was appalled the first year of the contest when children were asking what a shrimp boat looked like. As she explained, shrimp boats and factories were a part of her childhood and to think that only a generation or two later children don’t know what a shrimp boat looks like, it was shocking to her. For her the contest is a way to share heritage and history with kids in a way that’s an interactive learning experience. Father Mark praises Linda’s initiative saying, “That was one of the creative ideas of one of the people on the Blessing of the Fleet committee. She had kids in school and said what a great way to get kids to connect with the
industry and find out what the intricacies of those shrimping boats. So it’s one way of passing on some of the wonder and the technical part of shrimping.”

Figure 9
Detailed image of the milk carton shrimp boats entered into the contest in 2012. These boats lined the pageant stage during the ceremony and were moved St. Michael’s altar for the remainder of the year.

This event has no ceremony but the shrimp boats are prominently displayed around the pageant stage and spend the remainder of the year displayed around the altar of St. Michael’s. They stand in these locations as a symbol of shrimping but more importantly they show the continuation and expansion of a shrimping identity focused on reaching younger generations through new avenues, namely heritage.
HERITAGE EXHIBITS

Museums and exhibits stand as another form of heritage display both within the festival and the larger community. The Terrebonne Waterlife Museum located in Houma, Louisiana uses its space to present the unique ecosystem of the region in congruence with the multitude of industries such an environment has provided for the area. It combines child interaction, visual and auditory displays, detailed posters, and local artifacts to create a space conducive to learning for all members of the audience – children, out-of-town visitors, and local community members. Small local museums such as this one are springing up throughout the region where individuals are feeling a need to preserve, inform, and connect to their pasts. The Golden Meadow Library Historical Center, which opened its doors in 2007, is a locally founded and operated museum attached to the Golden Meadow branch of the Lafourche Parish Library (Figure 10). The space is practically wallpapered in historical images from the community, many exhibiting the local boat blessing throughout the past century, and the cases are filled with artifacts donated by community members. In Anne-Marie Bouttiaux’s analysis of museum and curation methodology, in the exhibition *Persona, Masks of Africa: Identities Hidden and Revealed* at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium, she asks the question, “should we present exhibitions for our peers alone? In theory, no, or at least not only for them; but in practice it seems we are always gearing our work to those who already share our worldview” (2012:40). For me, as an outsider it may have been difficult to navigate through the exhibit, there are no guidelines and few captions to contextualize the display, yet as I wandered back and forth between rooms leafing through old yearbooks, it became evident that for its developers and for the larger community it stands as a way to remember and connect to the past through the large
quantities of images and through one’s ability to donate and contribute a personal piece of history to the community.

Figure 10
The Golden Meadow Library Historical Center. Cases filled with artifacts and images plaster the wall with little or no captions.

During an interview with Karen, a City of Biloxi employee and key planner in the Blessing of the Fleet, I was encouraged to take some time to visit the temporary Blessing of the Fleet display in the lobby of City Hall and the larger walk through museum located in the Visitor’s Center along Beach Boulevard. Both of these displays are developed by the City of Biloxi (with state and federal funds used in the development of the Visitor’s Center). Many
discussions of museums focus on the sources of funding and management and how this affects the representations and target audiences. As Kwame Amoah Labi points out, the exhibition process is marked with many questions concerned with collaboration including, “what should be the exhibition content and who will present the narratives, tell the stories, or provide the information and the evidence? Who should the stakeholders be and to what extent should they be involved?” (2008:106). Furthermore, distinctions are established between community museums and government-based museums and the hybridity formed thereof as museums attempt to negotiate their displays with audience reception. For instance, Leslie Witz outlines three different types of museums based on funding and operation as it relates to the South African apartheid:

1. Some local government authorities gave museums under their control a complete overhaul, reconstituting them as institutions that collected, documented, and exhibited social histories of their locality…
2. Independent museums with very limited financial support from the government. Some of these are well resourced, forming parts of larger commercial operations or relying upon wealthy benefactors…
3. Independent museums, based upon a sense of spatial and/or political affiliation, were established as community spaces where histories forgotten and repressed… would be remembered, recovered, collected, and exhibited. [2006:108]

These categories are fluid and many museums, exhibits, and displays that pull from various funding sources and institutions must negotiate financial ownership with cultural authority.

Entering the Biloxi Visitor’s Center I had no question about who was the target audience. The brand new facility opened in 2011 and is geared directly towards the tourist, anyone new to the area looking to understand its history while searching through pamphlets for an authentic Biloxi Gulf Coast experience. Walking into the building I was bombarded to my right with a gift shop full of souvenirs, books, and even a small selection of local art (including oyster shell paintings sold by a vendor from the festival). The large open hallway leading from the building entrance towards the museum entrance was lined on both sides with flyers for every possible attraction – restaurants, hotels, casinos, chartered trips, upcoming events, maps, historical tours,
and more. If you’re interested in it, there’s a flyer for it. After amassing my own stack of flyers and pamphlets I followed in line behind a group heading into the walk-through museum. The museum is not divided into separate enclosed rooms but is an open space that guides the visitor through each display.

The museum itself isn’t very large and initially I noticed how visually appealing the art and displays are. The museum progresses from artistic representations of the environment and local history transitioning into a display of the seafood industries against beautiful coastal backdrops and finally ends in a large room focused on the racial and ethnic diversity of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. This last room is an interesting choice – one can understand the appeal of representing history, environment, and industry in artistic forms that replicate common touristic images of the beachside sunset but what purpose do the displays of local racial and ethnic groups serve for the city and the visitors? The room is filled with tall circular pieces, each focusing on a particular ethnicity and a representative family. For instance, one stand exhibits Croatians and includes the images of a particular Croatian family and accompanying text telling the story of that family, using the particular to be representative of the entire group. As Tony Bennett has pointed out, “a good deal of contemporary museum theory and practice has concerned itself with the ways in which museum environments… might be refashioned so as to transform museums into ‘differencing machines’ committed to the promotion of cross-cultural understanding, especially across divisions that have been racialized” (2006:46). While their attempt to draw the tourist into the racial and ethnic diversity of the region is commendable, the essentialism associated with their presentations of racial and ethnic groups and the deliberate exemption of a discourse surrounding conflicts between and within groups are worthy of numerous criticisms. The presentation glosses over the diversities found within racial and ethnic
groups and paints a romanticized picture of unity between groups that, historically, has not existed.

The Visitor’s Center museum takes local history and heritage and creates a visually appealing package for the visitor. In doing so, it removes the personal connections that locals have with their own heritage; even the representative ethnic families seem artificial and generic in comparison to the diversity of local seafood lineages and long time festival participants. Developed and curated by professionals specifically for an audience of visitors, there is little explicit community involvement outside of the families representing various ethnicities. While the Blessing of the Fleet is not incorporated into the Visitor’s Center museum, the City Hall display is specifically designed in celebration of the upcoming event.

The display is located in the immediate entrance of City Hall. It is a very simple bulletin board style presentation dedicated entirely to the history of the Blessing of the Fleet. It contains images, both historical and current, of the festival and there is limited text in the form of small captions with each photograph (Figure 11). Funding is not a major issue for this display; put together by staff members, the biggest expense was the cost of printing. It is not a museum, it is simply a brief temporary exhibit, but the question still arises as to what it means and who is the audience of such a presentation. This small display is not made for the visitor; it seems unlikely that City Hall has a steady stream of tourists passing through on a regular basis. It is geared towards the resident, those living in the city limits, and this is evident in its lack of text in the display. The exhibit assumes that the viewer is already aware of what the Blessing of the Fleet is; the captions simply supplement the particularities of the images. For instance, one caption only reads: “1958 Blessing of the Fleet: Fr. Herbert Mullin blessing the boats during the annual parade.” This type of exhibit can be interpreted as a statement from the city government that it
recognizes the importance of this cultural tradition and the history associated with it. The display emphasizes the festival’s place in local history. The local heritage that may be missing from the Visitor’s Center museum can be seen here with images and names of real individuals and boats that viewers can recognize and identify. While it is not an extreme example or an elaborately detailed display it illustrates the types of small presentations that stand to emphasize and promote the festival and the connections individuals within the community have towards both the event and the larger local heritage.

Figure 11
The Biloxi City Hall display immediately to the left of the entrance.
In contrast to the government-funded, designed, and/or managed displays in Biloxi, Morgan City is home to a corporately funded exhibit. The Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival is a non-profit organization and raises money from festival profits, individual donations, and sponsorships. Its businesslike qualities have been discussed more in depth previously, but it bears mentioning again in the discussion of who pays for the museum and determines its contents. Located in its own small building immediately adjacent to the festival headquarters the Cultural and Heritage Expo is open year-round during regular office hours and during the entire operating hours of the festival. I spent a significant amount of time in the building (it was one of the only spots with indoor restrooms and air conditioning) during the festival and visitor traffic was slim – less than ten people came through the Expo during all of my visits and reprieves from the humid Louisiana heat. While it was never explicitly stated, it was inferred by festival workers that when there aren’t thousands of festivalgoers roaming around downtown there are even fewer visitors stopping by the Expo.

Despite the reality of a small viewership, the question of who is the intended audience is still important. Being directly related to the festival, logically the expected goal of the Expo is to appeal to the festivalgoer. As discussed previously, each year the festival attracts roughly 100,000 participants from Morgan City and surrounding areas, as well as out-of-towners from other areas in Louisiana and neighboring states, such as Texas or Mississippi. The Culture and Heritage Expo in turn is geared both to the outsider and the insider. Its connection with the festival suggests that, ideally, it would display the local heritage associated with the shrimping and oil industry. As part and parcel of the festival organization it would incorporate regional histories and the current realities of the titular industries in an attempt to express, through exhibition, what the festival intends to represent. And yet, the Culture and Heritage Expo only
meets these expectations halfway – the small one-roomed building is filled with oil industry artifacts and posters detailing the history and methods of drilling for oil. The space is used as part museum, part storage with boxes and pallets crowding one corner (Figure 12). On the walls are research posters describing various themes relating to the oil field, such as “Women in the Offshore and Gas Industry.” Drilling tools, diving gear, and dioramas are on display alongside extensive captions. Shrimping is missing in any significant form from the entire exhibit. A few displays pertain to the festival itself, namely a collection of old copies of the local newspaper *The Daily Review* and a television playing a festival documentary on loop, but the dominant theme of the exhibition is the oil industry.

Figure 12
The Culture and Heritage Expo in Morgan City. There are diving and oil tools are displayed in one corner, TVs playing documentaries, informational posters on the walls and cases of artifacts.
After my first visit to the Culture and Heritage Expo I asked Louis, the festival director, where the shrimping industry was. He responded by saying the portion pertaining to the shrimping industry was supposed to be located in the office building. They already have rooms set aside, but the fact is it just isn’t a priority right now. Without a paid staff to curate the exhibit, the priorities of the two festival staff members instead seemed to be related to acquiring more carnival rides, the most popular bands, and adding new traditions, such as the second-line parade, imported from New Orleans, before the boat blessing. While it is clear that the festival itself is the top priority and the management and curation of the Expo is further down on the list it is still important to investigate why it is that only oil is displayed. The answer can be seen throughout the festival, especially in the boat blessing where there were no shrimp boats – the oil industry has the power. Oil has overtaken shrimping in the region as the dominant industry. Alford marks 1972 as the year the seafood industry lost its symbolic dominance, “twenty five years after the first producing offshore oil rig had been constructed in the fishing grounds south of Morgan City, the erosion of the power of the seafood industry was complete, literally through the economic dominance of oil, and symbolically through the installation of an oilman as king” (2003:97). He also recognizes the ability the oil industry had in purchasing their presence within the festival stating that “if it [the oil industry] did not ingratiate itself to the local minority of established Morgan City residents through the symbols that created its public image, it could literally purchase influence in the Festival events, and dominate Festival participation” (2003:136). Today extra money comes from sponsors including companies such as BP, Oil and Gas Rental Services, Inc. (OGRS), and Central Boat Rentals and Laborde Marine, two businesses that rent boats to the oil companies. This brief list of published sponsors doesn’t include the numerous private donors from the oil industry. The money is in the oil field and this fact is directly
reflected in the presentation within the Culture and Heritage Expo. Both the direct source of the money contributing to the Expo and the general theme focused on oil exemplify the status of the oil industries encroachment on the shrimping industry in the region.

How does this uneven representation reflect the community connection to personal and local heritage? Without a doubt the history of the oil industry relates to many personal histories in the area. Local exhibit viewers can relate old artifacts or newspaper articles to personal or family stories and informational posters can educate the outsider. There is little in the way of immediate personal connections, for instance there are no personally donated photographs on display. But the history presented through artifacts and text relate to local lineages within the industry. It remains, still, that connections to the shrimping industry are starkly missing creating a one-sided representation of culture and heritage. There is no strong voice speaking out about this discrepancy, a likely result of the low turnout rate for the Expo, but may also speak to the diminishing impact of shrimping in the area. As an event and community that prides itself on the dual socio-economic identity tied to both shrimping and petroleum, the Expo does little to illustrate both sides of that identity. Wouldn’t an outsider visiting the Culture and Heritage Expo at the Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival expect, as I did, to see a display of both industries as they relate to local identity? And, perhaps given the increase in oil production against the decrease in seafood sales, wouldn’t there be an expectation of a stronger focus on shrimping heritage as the community negotiates the changes in the occupation with their changing identities? While my expectations of the Culture and Heritage Expo were slightly off target, it is not surprising. As previously mentioned, the oil industry has the money to implant itself into the festival. More importantly, as discussed earlier, today the festival is the focus of local heritage and pride. The Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum Festival has been incorporated
into local identities just as much as the occupations it seeks to represent. Even though the Culture
and Heritage Expo is missing any display of the shrimping industry, this can be overlooked by
festivalgoers because the power of the festival is represented outside the Expo doors where
participants can view the popularity of the event in its music stage, carnival rides, food vendors,
and massive crowds engulfing the festival grounds.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

TERREBONNE ADVOCATES FOR POSSIBILITIES

Jim Peltier was born and raised in Chauvin, Louisiana and spent the earlier part of his career in the shrimping industry, eventually switching to the security of the oil field. Well known throughout the area, Jim has taken on the role of the informal town historian by collecting and documenting local history and culture, predominantly through photographs. Many of the 16,000 images he has scanned and saved on his computer and backed up on multiple hard drives come from his own personal collection, archives at the local libraries and churches, and other community members. Before our first meeting I had been informed of Jim’s extensive photographic library but it was as we sat in the rec center behind St. Joseph’s Catholic Church sifting through hundreds of files that I began to realize the work that Jim has accomplished and the relationships between images and individuals. The knowledge he has of each picture is impressive – with almost any photograph he can name the boat, the boat’s owner, the location, the event or occasion, and even individuals waving in the background. For example, during another meeting in the backroom at the Chauvin Branch of the Terrebonne Public Library he pointed to framed photographs on the wall saying, “Some on the wall are mine. You see that one there? I have that one on file, the boat blessing of 1932. That’s when it was up at the church. Now everybody’s kneeling down in the picture. That’s a really nice picture. And then I have the parade once it leaves there, the first one or two boats because that’s all you could see.” His ability to connect to the images speaks to the importance of his own heritage as well as the many contributors who have donated and informed his collection as well. The sheer number of images that Jim has scanned and saved creates an archive that is personally and directly related to the
individuals in the photographs and their own personal histories. This sort of documentation creates one of the most powerful connections between a community and its heritage – one that they have created by themselves for themselves. Currently, there is no wider audience viewing Jim’s database of photographs and there is no advertisement seeking more pictures. Instead, individuals find their images important and oftentimes seek out Jim to donate and offer copies to add to his collection.

Knowing that their photographic history is stored away is reassuring to the many contributors but how does the community gain access or viewership to this vast archive? With his reputation as the local historian Jim often receives requests for images from journalists, larger documentary research, and, most of all, local residents working on their own personal projects such as high school class assignments or church bulletin boards. His archive is a give and take endeavor and he happily obliges, especially with neighbors and friends. In describing a request from an acquaintance in the academic field he said, “At one point he said, ‘maybe I can take your photographs and I know somebody in the Smithsonian and maybe we can save them for you.’ His sister was married to my uncle so… I just know him.”

Aside from the general communal sharing of images upon request, Jim has formed Terrebonne Advocates for Possibilities (TAPS). With this relatively new organization he hopes to develop a resource about the local community for the local community. Currently the largest project is the Chauvin Culture and Heritage Festival. Held every fall, the festival celebrated its third year in 2012. Jim’s hope is that this endeavor will slowly replace the dearly missed Lagniappe on the Bayou, a large local church-sponsored festival held every fall that ended in 1994. The festival is a community project with volunteers cooking and selling foods, live music performances, and small set of vendors. When I attended the festival in 2012 it was small in size
but large in popularity among local residents. The two-day event has a steady stream of performances from local swamp country bands to children’s dance routines. Each side of the donated space is lined with food – traditional Cajun foods, such as gumbo, jambalaya, and bread pudding on one side and a large bake sale with an extensive array of goods to choose from. The music stage is front and center and clustered behind the audience is a small group of vendors selling crafts, such as knit or embroidery items, and knick-knacks, like the small, framed wooden art painting I purchased myself. There were children’s games lining the back wall of the festival and a small sign directing traffic inside the lodge for the culture and heritage slideshow. Inside chairs were set up in front of the projector that steadily flashed images I recognized from Jim’s archive. Although there were only two other individuals in the museum room, outside the crowd was surprisingly large. Chairs were set up while folks watched the many performances, friends bumped into one another and chatted, kids ran around their grandparents seeking shade. For an outsider there was little to do and see all day – grab a bite to eat, visit the few vendors, and watch a performance or two. For the local it was a place to come and spend the day running into all kinds of friends and neighbors and watching family perform on stage. So while perhaps the explicit culture and heritage presentation saw a low turnout, the event itself spoke to the ability to draw people together through the means of celebrating heritage.

Jim described the planning process and the obstacles he faces when planning an event that seeks to represent a community culture. He says,

It’s hard to judge what’s going to be right this year. Not saying, right this year in particular, just this year. But when you’re trying to do something and you’re calling it a cultural festival, what part of that do you want to present? Do you want to have all the music that’s going to be performed all French? Or do you want to have something that’s going to be more or less for our age groups. You’ve got to balance it somewhere because culturally even the things we’re doing today are just not written, but it is our culture. You know what I’m saying? So it’s just not written as our culture because our culture is written on history’s culture, the stuff of the past. We’re trying to promote culture today. It
doesn’t necessarily mean that it has to be in the past tense. Because if you put it in the past tense that’s all you can say, is it’s been there. By saying today we’ve reinvented, we’re whatever word you want to use, and to say that you have a young group making quilts or a young group trying to start French or this young group that’s making music – that’s still our culture. Whether it’s French or not. Whether it’s country or not. Whatever it is, it’s a living culture we’re trying to promote. So you kind of get stuck in that balancing act – where should I fall? Should I go this way? Should I go that way?

Jim’s struggles encompass the meaning of heritage as it stands for individuals and communities and the negotiating involved in engaging with that heritage. Festival participants are using these festivals to find the balance between the culture they participate in everyday and the past that is intrinsically tied to their identities. The conflicts he comes into contact with when determining what to include and what to represent are conscious active decisions he must make just like those who organize the Blessing of the Fleet each year all along the coast and the many museum curators found in these regions. It is up to the individuals involved to determine what they find important, to the event, to the community, to their own identities, and express that through the cultural performance of heritage within the Blessing of the Fleet. So despite the size of the Blessing of the Fleet, its long history, or its financial abilities, as evidenced by Jim and the Chauvin Culture and Heritage Festival, individuals are constantly using the festival as a tool for engaging, displaying, reacting, and reflecting their identities and the heritage that connects them.

CONCLUSION

Blessing of the Fleet festivals have been occurring in the Gulf Coast region for almost a century and have given participants a medium through which they can display their local identities and heritage and react to their changing socio-economic environments. Currently the Blessing of the Fleet is used to connect and engage with personal and local heritage, specifically related to an identity based on the shrimping and seafood industries. As the socio-economic
landscape changes in the Gulf Coast region, individuals and communities are able to emphasize a changing aspect of their identity through heritage. As the seafood industries become less secure individuals are seeking other employment opportunities in areas such as tourism and petroleum and the Blessing of the Fleet becomes a means for them to hold on to a part of themselves that they are not ready to lose.

Tourism has grown across the Gulf Coast region with the beach resorts and casinos found in Biloxi, Mississippi and the hunting and fishing camps found along the Louisiana coast. As the physical and economic landscapes change to accommodate the shifting industries the Blessing of the Fleet incorporates these changes in ways that reflect and respond to the dominant economic force. The Biloxi Blessing of the Fleet advertises itself to the tourist population but explicitly and implicitly represents a heritage associated with shrimping. Its location, convenience, and physical layout attract the tourist but its message, through displays such as the Shrimp King and Queen pageant, is focused on the history and perpetuation of an identity related to shrimping and seafood.

In addition to a rise in the tourism industry, in Louisiana, the shrimping and seafood industries are rivaled by the oil industry. For the past century oil companies have entered the economic landscape creating more secure offshore jobs compared to the fluctuating, sometimes unprofitable, seafood occupations. For some communities, such as Morgan City, an identity focused on the oil industry is just as important as seafood and this is evident in the many combined displays – the “kiss,” the name change, and the logo. As Morgan City has grown to be such a large event heritage and local identity is just as much connected to the festival itself as it is to the two industries it seeks to represent. In this way the Culture and Heritage Expo can only
represent the oil industry without any loud protestation; the successful festival is testament to the perseverance of local identities.

While the Blessing of the Fleet festivals vary from one town to the next and have managed a multitude of changes throughout their histories, the festivals have and will continue to provide an outlet for festivalgoers to interact and construct their identity as shrimpers, as locals, as Catholic, or as Cajun. The festival is a tool for representing self to both outside visitors and the community. As long as the Blessing of the Fleet continues its participants will be able to construct and display their identities as shrimping communities whatever socio-economic changes may come.
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Austin, Diane E.  

Bennett, Tony  

Bienvenu, Marcelle, Carl A. Brasseaux, and Ryan A Brasseaux  

Bouttiaux, Anne-Marie  

Bruner, Edward M.  

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Vicknair, Monique and Lawrence Chatagnier  
Walton, Shana

Ware, Carolyn E

Witz, Leslie
APPENDIX

Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight

Unless qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research/ projects utilizing human as subjects, or samples, or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This Form helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.

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Applicant, please fill out the application in its entirety and include the completed application as well as Parts A-E, listed below. When submitting to the IRB, once the application is completed, please submit two copies of the completed application to the IRB Office or to a member of the Human Subjects Screening Committee. Members of this committee can be found at http://research.lsu.edu/Compliance/PoliciesProcedures/InstitutionalReviewBoard%28IRB%29/29/item24737.html

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A Complete Application Includes All of the Following:
(A) Two copies of this completed form and two copies of part B thru E.
(B) A detailed letter of explanation (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts 1 & 2).
(C) Copies of all instruments to be used.
(D) The consent form that you will use in the study (see Part 3 for more information).
(E) Certificate of Completion of Human Subjects Protection Training for all personnel involved in the project, including students who are involved with testing or handling data, unless already on file with the IRB. Training link: (http://pshp.ufltraining.com/users/login.php)
(F) IRB Security of Data Agreement: (http://research.lsu.edu/files/item26774.pdf)

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1) Principal Investigator: Audriana Hubbard
Dept: Anthropology and Geog  Ph: 850-544-0347
Rank: Graduate Student
E-mail: ahubbard@lsu.edu

2) Co-Investigator(s): Please include department, rank, phone and e-mail for each.
*If student, please identify and name supervising professor in this space

Helen Regis, Dept of Anthropology, Advisor/Professor, hregis1@lsu.edu, 225-578-6171

3) Project Title: Boat Blessings and Shrimping Heritage in Coastal Louisiana

4) Proposal? (yes or no) No
If Yes, LSU Proposal Number
Also, if YES, either ☐ This application completely matches the scope of work in the grant
☐ More IRB Applications will be filed later

5) Subject pool (e.g. Psychology students): Festival Participants and Coastal Residents
*Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children < 18; the mentally impaired; pregnant women; the aged; others). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.

6) PI Signature: [Signature] Date 7/19/12 (no per signatures)

** I certify my responses are accurate and complete. If the project scope or design is later changed, I will resubmit for review. I will obtain written approval from the Authorized Representative of all non-LSU institutions in which the study is conducted. I also understand that it is my responsibility to maintain copies of all consent forms at LSU for three years after completion of the study, if I leave LSU before that time the consent forms should be preserved in the Departmental Office.

Screening Committee Action: Exempted ☑ Not Exempted Category/Paragraph 2

Reviewer Matthews Signature [Signature] Date 8/24/12

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This study, titled Boat Blessings and Shrimping Heritage in Coastal Louisiana, is intended to better understand the relationship between communities and the boat blessing—through the different roles of the church and religion, occupational practices, shared histories and memories, and varying levels of community involvement. Interviews conducted in different towns along the coast including, but not limited to, Golden Meadow, LA, Chauvin, LA, Morgan City, LA, and Biloxi, MS, seek to involve any person, over 18 years of age, directly involved with the event, with a recollection of past events, or with an outsider's perspective.

I, Audri Hubbard, am the sole researcher, and may publish your responses. Any risk involved in participation is minimal, if any. Yet, as a participant, you have the right to refuse or withdraw from the study at any time. Pseudonyms will be used throughout the study and in any further publications and every effort will be made to keep your identity private.

You can contact me at any time regarding your privacy, the study itself, or any other questions or issues that may arise. Audri Hubbard – phone: (850) 544-0347, email: ahubbard@lsu.edu.

The study has been discussed with you and all your questions have been answered. You may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If you have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, you can contact Robert C. Mathews, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb.

Study Exempted by:
Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman
Institutional Review Board
Louisiana State University
203 B-1 David Boyd Hall
225-578-8692 www.lsu.edu/irb
Exemption Expires: 8/23/2015

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Audriana Hubbard was born and raised in the humid hills of North Florida where, after many tries at Biology and Chemistry, she eventually smartened up and went on to receive a Bachelor’s in Anthropology and Religion from Florida State University. After completing her studies at Louisiana State University and departing from the great muggy state of Louisiana she plans to run off with her pup Theodore and eventually pursue a doctoral degree in Anthropology.